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War, Clausewitz, and the Trinity

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For my Dad
Frederick Waldman
1922-1996

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not currently submitted in candidature for any other degree. It is the result of my own independent investigation, and all authorities and sources which have been consulted are acknowledged in the Bibliography.

Signed Thomas Waldman

Date

Abstract

Today, the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz are employed almost ubiquitously in strategic studies, military history, and defence literature, sometimes at length, at others only in passing. Certain of his central insights have suffered distorting representations in recent years. This study is an attempt to analyse Clausewitz's central theoretical device for understanding war – the 'remarkable trinity' of politics, chance, and passion. It aims to present a more accurate conception and one which is truer to Clausewitz's intentions.

It seeks to achieve this through an in-depth analysis and reinterpretation of the text of *On War* and Clausewitz's other writings, conducted through the prism of the trinity and in the light of contemporary research on war. It draws on and synthesises many excellent existing studies, but argues that there is room for further clarification. It presents fresh perspectives into certain aspects of Clausewitz's thought and emphasises elements of his theory that have been neglected.

The interpretation is founded on three central approaches which place Clausewitz in historical context, considers critiques of his ideas, and recognises that the trinity cannot be understood in isolation, but rests upon ideas found in Clausewitz's wider work.

The trinity is a uniquely powerful framework for understanding the phenomenon of war. It cannot hope to answer all the strategic problems we face today – that was simply not what Clausewitz intended – but rather constitutes a mental guide for anyone interested in the subject, from commanders to university students. It focuses attention on the central underlying forces of war in their endlessly complex interaction. Once allowances are made for abstruse terminology and irregularities given the unfinished nature of *On War*, it is hoped that this thesis will underscore the timelessness of the trinity.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Writing in the early nineteenth century, Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), a Prussian general, produced what is perhaps the most famous book on the nature and theory of war. Indeed, Bernard Brodie wrote that his masterpiece *On War*, 'is not simply the greatest but the only true great book on war.'¹ Harry Summers wrote that in 'military science...*On War* is still the seminal work.'² Christopher Coker describes Clausewitz as 'the greatest phenomenologist of war.'³ His book is 'often mentioned, occasionally quoted, but little read.'⁴ We might also add to that list, frequently misunderstood: a fact that has engendered 'misinterpretations of enormous consequence.'⁵ Studies employing or drawing upon purportedly Clausewitzian insights, that demonstrate little evidence of deep familiarity with the text, continue to proliferate.

Clausewitz is mentioned almost ubiquitously in strategic studies and military historical literature and often in an extremely instrumental fashion. His ideas are utilised in a very selective and cursory manner, so that he appears everywhere but often only in passing. The real Clausewitz is often lost in a mass of fleeting references, most of which are misleading or do not fully convey the complexity of his arguments. Many modern popular works on war deploy supposedly Clausewitzian ideas which are almost unrecognisable to anyone with a moderate acquaintance with his work, or which present such crude, often derivative, representations as to appear almost satirical. Most striking is the disproportion between the towering status of his name and how little he appears to have been read in any great depth. As is often the fate of great works, they are scavenged for ideas to lend gravitas to spuriously related arguments.

¹ Bernard Brodie, 'The Continuing Relevance of *On War*', in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993), p. 58.

² Harry Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2003), p. 4.

³ Christopher Coker, *Waging War Without Warriors? The Changing Culture of Military Conflict* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 54.

⁴ Christopher Bellamy, *Knights in White Armour: The New Art of War and Peace* (London: Pimlico, 1998), p. 25. This is a quote which itself is often mentioned, but one suspects, rarely acted upon.

⁵ Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. x.

It has been written that, in order to avoid such endless misunderstanding, *On War* ‘has to be studied repeatedly, seriously, and in depth.’⁶ The irony that this was written by one of Clausewitz’s most mistaken interpreters should not detract from the wisdom of the injunction.⁷ Most crucially, Clausewitz must be studied in context; as Peter Paret notes: ‘Every theory that outlasts its creator tends to be reinterpreted unhistorically...Clausewitz’s writings have suffered the attendant distortions more than most.’⁸ Also, Azar Gat has stressed that the ‘obscurity of Clausewitz’s text has continually left room for conflicting and unhistorical interpretations.’⁹ Of course, secondary interpretations are inevitably subjective, however this does not prevent us from recognising where some are clearly superior to others. The prominent sources of forgivable misinterpretations are well-known: the unfinished text, the inherent difficulty of some of the ideas, the use of outdated concepts, and problems associated with translation. The only means of overcoming these potential interpretative pitfalls is through a detailed reading of *On War* and Clausewitz’s wider work, attempting to understanding the man himself, and situating his ideas in the time they were written, as well as drawing upon a range of secondary analyses, which are themselves based on rigorous research.

To guard against mistaken readings of *On War*, a key aim of this study is to provide a thorough analysis of Clausewitz’s central theoretical device: his ‘remarkable trinity.’ The trinity can be seen as the apotheosis of his theorising. His brief description of the trinity comes at the end of Book 1, Chapter 1 – the only chapter we know he considered complete¹⁰ – and is presented under the subheading, ‘The Consequences for Theory’¹¹ (see Appendix I for full text). In this respect, the trinity represents Clausewitz’s central analytic framework for comprehending the nature of war; in some respects it can be viewed as all eight

⁶ Martin van Creveld, ‘The Eternal Clausewitz’, in Michael I. Handel (ed.), *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 36.

⁷ Creveld’s analysis and interpretation in his ‘The Eternal Clausewitz’ article is accurate, clear, and sympathetic. It is his later work which somewhat incomprehensibly misrepresents Clausewitz’s ideas.

⁸ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 8.

⁹ Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 202.

¹⁰ In an undated note he states that, ‘The first chapter of Book One alone I regard as finished.’ Clausewitz, ‘Unfinished note, presumably written in 1830’, in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 79.

¹¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 101.

Books of *On War* condensed into five paragraphs. Christopher Bassford rightly states that ‘the Trinity is the concept that ties all of Clausewitz’s many ideas together and binds them into a meaningful whole.’¹² Read in isolation, the trinity can, and has, led to as much confusion as clarity, because, on first reading, it can appear decidedly simplistic, imprecise, and, perhaps, somewhat odd. As Hugh Smith observes, though Clausewitz ‘nowhere discusses passion, reason, and chance at length, these elements permeate his entire work.’¹³ It might be even more accurate to state that he does discuss those elements at considerable length, but rarely explicitly in direct reference to the trinitarian framework itself.

It should also be noted that the trinity might appear to some as distinctly cold and analytical – a description of the nature of war which fails to reflect the awfulness of the subject. Yet, Clausewitz never lost sight of the ‘horrible reality of war’¹⁴ and he certainly was no militarist,¹⁵ even if he saw war as an occasional necessity, and, moreover, one which may entail great bloodshed.¹⁶ War, he believed, ‘is no pastime; it is no mere joy in daring and winning, no place for irresponsible enthusiasts. It is a serious means to a serious end.’¹⁷ Nevertheless, he stressed that, ‘It would be futile – even wrong – to try and shut one’s eyes to what war really is from sheer distress at its brutality.’¹⁸ Clausewitz was not deluded about the reality of his subject, but war, as only a soldier could understand, is more ambiguous in its meaning and impressions than those who have not experienced it may believe.¹⁹ Clausewitz had witnessed the heart-

¹² Christopher Bassford, ‘The Primacy of Policy and the Trinity in Clausewitz’s Mature Thought’, in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 75.

¹³ Hugh Smith, *On Clausewitz* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), p. 116.

¹⁴ Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 53.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹⁶ ‘Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat the enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 84. If Coker is correct, this perhaps reflects the general ancient Greek conception of war, which did not glorify it, but ‘accepted that it was inevitable; it was part of the human condition.’ Coker, *Waging War Without Warriors*, p. 17.

¹⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁹ Joanna Bourke quotes a soldier in World War I who wrote, ‘It is all the most wonderful fun; better fun than one could ever imagine’. During the first Battle of Ypres the soldier also remarked that, ‘I’ve never been so fit or nearly so happy in my life before; I adore the fighting.’

rending crossing of the Berezina by Napoleon's retreating armies and was moved to write that, 'If my feelings had not been hardened it would have sent me mad.'²⁰ He also understood that war could be an intensely life-affirming activity; as Coker notes in reference to Clausewitz, war 'teaches us – and it is a severe teacher – a great deal about ourselves...[it is] the ultimate existential experience.'²¹ War could also be intensely enjoyable: Clausewitz often wrote to his wife about his great excitement with regard to a forthcoming battle.²² In sum, war for Clausewitz was an emotionally and morally complex phenomenon, at once dreadful, necessary, and exhilarating.²³

Who was Carl von Clausewitz?

Adventure, learning, and love – the young Clausewitz: 1780-1806

Before moving on to outline the objectives of this study, it is necessary to introduce the man and his life.²⁴ Carl Phillip Gottlieb von Clausewitz was born in June 1780 in the country town of Burg seventy miles southwest of Berlin.²⁵ His father was a retired lieutenant from the Seven Years War who had barely

Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Granta Books, 1999), p. 140.

²⁰ Quoted in Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle: The Political Theory of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 161. In reaction to the same event he also commented that 'he would never be free from the impressions of this terrible spectacle.' Quoted in Janeen Klinger, 'The Social Science of Carl von Clausewitz', *Parameters*, Spring 2006, p. 81.

²¹ Christopher Coker, *Waging War*, p. 30.

²² Prior to the battle of Auerstedt in 1806 Clausewitz wrote to Marie: 'The day after tomorrow...there will be a great battle, for which the entire army is longing. I myself look forward to this day as I would to my own wedding day.' Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), p. 58.

²³ Experiences of war are of course highly subjective, but history certainly reveals as many instances of those who have found it great fun and a worthy pursuit, as those who have deplored it or thought it the most despicable of things. As Robert E. Lee commented, 'It is well that war is so terrible; we would grow too fond of it' and Genghis Kahn could state that 'Happiness lies in conquering your enemies, in driving them in front of you, in taking their property, in savouring their despair, in raping their wives and daughters.' Quoted in Gwynne Dyer, *War: The Lethal Custom* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), p. 154. Gray notes that, 'It is all too human to organize to fight and even to enjoy combat (especially vicariously).' Colin S. Gray, 'Clausewitz rules, OK? The future is the past – with GPS', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, 1999, p. 181.

²⁴ For an overview of the military aspects of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, see Appendix II.

²⁵ Unless explicitly referenced, the following brief biography is drawn from two principal sources: Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, and Parkinson, *Clausewitz*. Other potted biographies can be found in much of the general literature on Clausewitz.

managed to retain his claim to noble status. Clausewitz grew up in a house frequented by officers.²⁶ He received a fairly mediocre provincial education. As was common at the time, just prior to his twelfth birthday Clausewitz was accepted into the 34th Infantry Regiment commanded by the brother of the late Frederick the Great, Prince Ferdinand.²⁷ After missing the momentous cannonade at Valmy in 1792,²⁸ within months Clausewitz enthusiastically received his first taste of war when his regiment was deployed to take control of the Rhine from French revolutionary forces in early 1793. Clausewitz took part in the series of operations that culminated in the liberation, in July, of the strategically important garrison town of Mainz.²⁹ The army then marched south to the Vosges Mountains where, due to being 'fragmented into tendrils of outposts and detachments',³⁰ it primarily conducted a series of limited raids and ambushes until the Peace of Basel ended hostilities between France and Prussia in 1795.

These experiences of combat undoubtedly 'provided the impulse...to his early studies and his first theoretical speculations',³¹ which were given time to germinate in the relative period of calm Clausewitz spent garrisoned in the mundane town of Neuruppin between 1795 and 1801.³² Despite the somewhat prosaic nature of this tour of duty, Clausewitz nevertheless both benefited from the pedagogical reforms and enlarged curriculum introduced by the regimental commander Freidrich von Tschammer and his intimate experience of Prussian military society and institutions.³³ Indeed, his reformist and modernising ideas

²⁶ In his 'Observations on Prussia in Her Great Catastrophe' Clausewitz notes that in his parents house he saw no one but officers, 'and not the best educated and most versatile at that.' In Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 40.

²⁷ Paret notes that 85 out of 130 Prussian Generals from Clausewitz's generation began their careers between the ages of twelve and fourteen. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 19.

²⁸ This great artillery battle saw the French Revolutionary forces repel the Prussians and Austrians forces commanded by the Duke of Brunswick.

²⁹ In June, Mainz was subjected to a relentless bombardment by allied artillery, to which Goethe, who was present, responded: 'Every heart was burdened with sadness.' Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 25.

³⁰ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³² Just prior to the period in Neuruppin, Clausewitz spent a few months on leave living with a farmer's family in the county of Taklenburg, where he was able to ride to the nearby town of Osnabruck and obtain a number of political and religious books. Later he wrote, 'There with one stroke the vanity of the young soldier became a great philosophical ambition.' Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 28.

³³ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, pp. 36-55.

were probably inspired by the obvious contrast he drew between his actual experience of battle and the formalistic, ceremonial character of the manoeuvres performed at Neuruppin. As Clausewitz noted, ‘even a modicum of reflection on these exercises...was bound to lead at once to the realisation that none of this had taken place in the war that we had fought.’³⁴

It was not until Clausewitz’s admission to the Berlin Institute for Young Officers in the summer of 1801 that he could effectively begin to develop his intellect and expand his education. The institution was under the directorship of the Hanoverian, reformist minded, Gerhard von Scharnhorst who soon became one of Clausewitz’s closest friends and, essentially, his surrogate father.³⁵ Scharnhorst emphasised the development of the students’ intellect, powers of judgement, and independence of thought, whilst not forcing upon them any particular theory of war. Here, under the guidance of Scharnhorst, Clausewitz became acquainted with some of the fundamental issues he would later expand upon in his mature works, such as the relationship between theory and practice, the importance of history and sociology, and the philosophic method taught primarily by the lecturer Johann Kiesewetter – a populariser of Kant.³⁶ (Also, towards the end of this period, in December 1803, Clausewitz met his future wife, Marie von Brühl, lady-in-waiting to the Queen Mother).³⁷ Initially struggling to keep up in lectures, Clausewitz graduated at the head of his class in the spring of 1804 and secured a regular appointment as adjutant to Prince August.³⁸ With this appointment he was brought into increasing contact with groups attached to the imperial court, yet usually as something of an outsider.³⁹ After much fumbled, vacillating diplomacy and ill-advised strategic manoeuvring Frederick William III’s Prussia once again found itself on a collision course with a formidable France under the leadership of the now Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, and as Clausewitz prepared to go to war he

³⁴ Quoted in Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 45.

³⁵ Clausewitz referred to Scharnhorst as ‘the father and friend of my spirit.’ Quoted in Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 75.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 69-71.

³⁷ They would be married in December 1810.

³⁸ Prior to this, in 1803, Clausewitz was seconded as temporary adjutant to Prince August, son of the youngest brother of Frederick the Great. Peter Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 201.

³⁹ King Frederick William, in particular, viewed Clausewitz unfavourably. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, pp. 109-10.

prophetically wrote that Prussia's situation was 'infinitely wretched.'⁴⁰ In September 1806 his regiment began its journey to the battlefield of Auerstedt.

Soldier, teacher, and reformer – Clausewitz comes of age: 1806-1815

Clausewitz's introduction to the Napoleonic form of warfare was a dramatic one. Clausewitz was positioned on the right flank of the Prussian army at the Battle of Auerstedt⁴¹ and in the midst of the fighting he had to take charge of an entire battalion, managing to command a reasonably orderly fighting retreat.⁴² Subsequently, in late September, Prince August and Clausewitz were cut off from the main force, captured by French forces, paroled near Berlin, and then transferred to France where they were interned under 'easy conditions',⁴³ for ten months until the treaty of Tilsit, in July 1807, permitted their repatriation. Before returning to Germany they spent a number of intriguing weeks at the Château de Coppet by Lake Geneva, exile home of Napoleon's great literary foe, Madame de Staël, whom Clausewitz befriended along with other members of her 'camp' such as August Wilhelm Schlegel and Benjamin Constant.⁴⁴ Between Clausewitz's return to Prussia and the war of 1812, Clausewitz became an integral member of the Military Reorganisation Commission headed by Scharnhorst at the new War Department,⁴⁵ charged with modernising the army, or as Scharnhorst put it, the 'internal regeneration of the military system, alike in respect of formation, promotion, practice, and especially spirit.'⁴⁶ The reforms entailed not only measures internal to the military institution, such as discipline, equipment, and tactics, but also changes which would have far-reaching

⁴⁰ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 118.

⁴¹ Prince August commanded a grenadier battalion and was accompanied by Clausewitz.

⁴² This was the only occasion of his direct command of troops in battle.

⁴³ They were officially termed 'guests of the government' rather than prisoners. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 130.

⁴⁴ Parkinson describes how life at Coppet in those weeks was filled with 'dinners, rehearsals, performances, excursions on the lake, rides, music, romances and endless talk.' Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 92.

⁴⁵ This was based in Königsberg in East Prussia where the court and government had moved following the Treaty of Tilsit of July 1807 and were to remain until December 1809. The official creation of the Ministry of War in March 1809 was a crucial development as it replaced the old numerous, overlapping, and conflicting departments which had contributed to the confusion evident in the failure of 1806. Clausewitz was never a full member of the Commission but worked very closely with Scharnhorst – appointed as his aide upon promotion in 1809 – describing himself as the chairman's 'literary agent.' Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 97.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

implications for Prussian society;⁴⁷ most notably plans for ending the nobility's monopoly of officer corps commissions and the introduction of universal military service. By the end of this period Clausewitz had risen to become head of Scharnhorst's office whilst he was also appointed as lecturer at the new *Allgemeine Kriegsschule* where he taught a class on 'Small Wars', became military tutor to the Crown Prince, and was placed on the board of the commission responsible for drafting new tactical and operational guides for the infantry and cavalry. This was a period of intense intellectual development for Clausewitz and also provided him with a wealth of experience regarding the inner-workings of military administration and policy.

Clausewitz's intellectual endeavours were once again put on hold when the battlefield beckoned for the third time in 1812. Outraged by Prussia's submission to Napoleon's designs in the 1812 alliance,⁴⁸ Clausewitz resigned his commission in the Spring so he could serve with the Russian army.⁴⁹ In this capacity he took part in the dramatic Russian retreat including the momentous battles of Smolensk, Borodino, and the fall of Moscow in 1812 – all so movingly depicted in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in which Clausewitz briefly appears.⁵⁰ During the subsequent reversal of fortunes and Napoleon's retreat over the winter – including the dreadful crossing of the Berezina – he played an important diplomatic role in the Convention of Tauroggen, which ensured the defection of General von Yorck's Prussian forces who were at that time fighting

⁴⁷ As such, these reforms were strongly resisted by conservative elements in Prussian society and politics.

⁴⁸ According to the French alliance Prussia was to provide 20,000 men and provide for the supply of the *Grand Armée* as it marched into Russia. Also, Berlin was occupied. Clausewitz's fury at the turn of events were vented in his *Bekanntnissdenkschrift* or 'political declaration' of February 1812, in which he denounced the 'childish hope of taming the tyrant's anger by voluntarily disarming, of winning his trust through craven submission and flattery...[and that] this drop of poison in the blood of the nation is passed on to posterity, crippling and eroding the strength of future generations.' Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 290.

⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that this meant Clausewitz would not only be fighting against Prussian troops, but against his two brothers who remained in that army. Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 136.

⁵⁰ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 920. Prince Andrei is quite scornful towards the Germans in his midst (Clausewitz and Walzogen), and fulminates against Germany for handing 'all Europe over to *him* [Napoleon], and now they have come here to teach us.' This is unfair towards the real Clausewitz as he of course rejected the policy of surrender to Napoleon's designs. Andrei is particularly bitter about Clausewitz's (fictional) idea of widening the war to wear out Napoleon. His criticism appears to be an emotional one, given the threat such a course posed to civilians and that his own family might become victims; something which a foreigner can blithely ignore ('He doesn't care about that'). Again, perhaps this is unfair. Clausewitz actually advocated the same policy in his own country in 1813.

for the *Grand Armée*. Subsequently, Clausewitz and Yorck returned to East Prussia and coordinated the raising of a militia of 20,000 men – the *Landwehr*: an act that did much to persuade Frederick William III to finally declare war on France in March 1813. Still in Russian uniform, due to the King's refusal to readmit him to the Prussian army, Clausewitz served as Scharnhorst's assistant at the Battle of Grossgörschen⁵¹ in May where the latter was fatally wounded much to Clausewitz's dismay. During the Leipzig campaign in the autumn, which drove Napoleon out of Germany, Clausewitz was far from the main theatre of operations near the Baltic coast serving as chief of staff to the Russo-German Legion. Only on 11 April 1814 did he finally receive a commission as colonel in the Prussian infantry. During the 'Hundred Days' of Napoleon's return in 1815, Clausewitz served as chief of staff to the 3rd Corps which fought a difficult holding battle at Wavre and kept Marshal Grouchy from reinforcing Napoleon at Waterloo.⁵²

Reflection, study, and writing – the mature Clausewitz: 1815-1831

After the war, Clausewitz was assigned to Gneisenau's headquarters at Coblenz on the Rhine as chief of staff. From this time on, Clausewitz devoted much of his spare time to intensive research and prolific writing, including the early drafts of *On War*. In 1818 he somewhat reluctantly accepted his appointment as director of the Berlin War Academy which came with his promotion to major-general. In this administrative role Clausewitz advocated a number of suggestions for reform of the curriculum of the College, but the assassination of August von Kotzebue in 1819 by extremist students led to a conservative backlash and resistance to change. Clausewitz devoted much of the 1820s to historical and theoretical study and remained in Berlin until a new appointment as commanding officer of the 3rd Inspection of the Artillery entailed his move to Breslau in Silesia in September 1830. However, before having time to settle into his new appointment, upheavals spread throughout parts of Europe in 1830⁵³ and

⁵¹ Also known as the Battle of Lützen.

⁵² Peter Paret, 'Clausewitz', in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 195.

⁵³ The overthrow of Charles X of France in the 'Three Glorious Days' of the July Revolution, and the Belgian uprising.

prompted the mobilisation of part of the Prussian army – with Clausewitz as its chief of staff – in response to these events and, specifically, the Warsaw insurrection in late November.⁵⁴ After initially being stationed in Berlin, where Clausewitz had increasing influence amongst the high command, in March 1831 he left for Posen with his great friend Gneisenau, then commander-in chief of the army. An encroaching cholera epidemic from the east meant Clausewitz was entrusted with organising a *cordon sanitaire* on the Prussian frontier and, after the headquarters at Posen was disbanded, Clausewitz returned to Breslau on 7 November and was joined by Marie two days later. They were able to spend eight days together before Clausewitz contracted cholera and died on the evening of the 16th at the age of fifty-one. The book he had been working on prior to his eastern posting remained unfinished, but it is to that work and, in particular, its central theoretical device – the trinity – that we now return.

Introducing the trinity

So, what exactly is the ‘paradoxical’ or ‘remarkable trinity’?⁵⁵ The trinity is essentially a succinct expression of ideas composed of a number of central concepts held together by a deeper unifying and integrative logic.⁵⁶ Bassford

⁵⁴ The Polish Revolt was an expression of nationalist resistance to Russian control. The spark for the uprising was Nicholas I’s decision to mobilise the Polish army for a possible intervention against French and Belgian revolutionaries. Both Prussia and Austria deployed troops on their borders in case the revolt spread to their own Polish subjects. Russia invaded in Spring 1831 and Warsaw eventually surrendered in September.

⁵⁵ The adjective ‘remarkable’ – used in the 1976 edition of the Howard and Paret translation is perhaps to be preferred. As Bassford notes, the term ‘paradoxical’ is misleading as he does not ‘think that Clausewitz wanted to convey any implication that the elements of the trinity contradict one another either in reality or in appearance.’ Bassford suggests ‘fascinating’ as another potentially more accurate translation of the adjective, which reflects Clausewitz’s profound interest in the operation of the forces contained in the trinity. Bassford, ‘The Primacy of Policy’, p. 79.

⁵⁶ Clausewitz’s use of the term ‘trinity’ should not be confused with its theological meaning; however, such a reading may aid our comprehension. In general usage the term refers to a group of three closely related things. Clausewitz wants to go further than this and, although not intending to imply any divine meaning, analogically, comparison with the Holy Trinity usefully stresses the inherent unity constituted by the three elements. An analysis of the nature of war that eschews any one of the tendencies will be ‘totally useless,’ much as the nature of the Godhead cannot be truly understood without reference to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This emphasis on the ‘integrative interrelation of all phenomena’ was common to German idealism, which had a significant impact on Clausewitz’s thought, particularly towards the end of his life. Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 232.

describes it as an ‘amazingly compressed summation of reality.’⁵⁷ In formulating the trinity, Clausewitz simply wanted to argue that war is made up of three central elements, or dominant tendencies.⁵⁸ War, is ‘comprised of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.’⁵⁹ These elements are variously condensed into short-hand versions such as ‘violence, chance and politics’, ‘hostility, chance, and purpose’⁶⁰ or even ‘irrational, non-rational, and rational factors.’⁶¹ This thesis will generally, though not exclusively refer to them as passion, chance, and policy/politics.⁶²

The three tendencies can be understood as variously embodying a number of Clausewitz’s most important ideas and insights that are found throughout the text of *On War* and his other work. For instance, Clausewitz’s important concept of ‘friction’ is strongly associated with the tendency of chance and probability. Many authors have chosen to concentrate on a detailed analysis of any one of these various subsidiary concepts,⁶³ usually either to consider its contemporary relevance or to add weight to a certain argument. Importantly, however, this is not to suggest individual concepts simply relate neatly to any one tendency: often they span the trinity’s conceptual divides. Clausewitz’s understanding of ‘moral forces’, for instance, applies in some measure to all three elements, but perhaps principally to passion and chance. There is nothing inherently wrong with an approach that focuses on particular concepts, yet

⁵⁷ Christopher Bassford, ‘Tip-Toe Through the Trinity or The Strange Persistence of Trinitarian Warfare’, Available online at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Trinity/Trinity8.htm>>, retrieved 14 March 2008.

⁵⁸ Where the terms ‘element’ or ‘tendency’ are used throughout the study, it is assumed they refer to the three separate tendencies of the trinity, unless the context clearly suggests an alternative usage.

⁵⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 101.

⁶⁰ Antulio Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 55.

⁶¹ Christopher Bassford and Edward J. Villacres, ‘Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity’, *Parameters*, Autumn, 1995.

⁶² So long as an inclusive and broad understanding of each tendency is adopted, it does not greatly matter what labels are attached to each. Nevertheless, passion, chance, and policy/politics are preferred here.

⁶³ We have in mind such concepts as: friction, centre of gravity, culminating point of victory, and so forth.

Clausewitz was at pains to stress the importance of maintaining an accurate conception of the whole whilst considering its various parts.

Each tendency – passion, chance, and policy/politics – of the trinity is (mainly) manifested in a corresponding subject within society: respectively, the people, the commander and his army, and the government. The former of these sets of three elements constitutes, what in this study will henceforth be termed the ‘primary’ or ‘objective’ trinity, and the latter, the ‘secondary’ or ‘subjective’ trinity. In addition to these two central conceptual levels is the often overlooked level of context (not itself comprising a trinity).⁶⁴ As we will show, this partially hidden level of the holistic framework serves a vital theoretical role with regard to the way it helps explain change at the secondary level. Failure to recognise the importance of contextual change can seriously detract from the intended flexibility of the trinity. Context might usefully be considered a ‘tertiary’ level in Clausewitz’s theory. So, pulling these strands together, the complete trinitarian framework is composed of three levels:

- *Primary*: passion, chance, and policy/politics.
- *Secondary*: people; commander and army; government.⁶⁵
- *Tertiary*: context.

To avoid confusion it is important to note how these levels relate to the structure of this study. The ontological foundations of the trinity, discussed below, and Chapter 2, which examines the theoretical foundations of Clausewitz’s approach, do not themselves constitute levels in the framework, nor relate specifically to any particular level: they underlie the entire framework. Chapter 3 explores the tertiary level of context. The primary tendencies are the principal subject of Chapters 4, 5, and 6, although historical examples, properly understood, relate to the secondary level. Chapter 7 draws the analysis together, seeking to reveal how all the levels relate to one another.

⁶⁴ The dimensions of context are not usefully delineated into three broad areas that relate neatly to the three tendencies of either the primary and secondary trinity. Context is, as we will see in Chapter 3 of the thesis, a much more diffuse and complex realm. In that chapter seven broad dimensions are proposed and which impact on all three of the groups at the secondary level (even if some dimensions generally pertain more to certain social groups).

⁶⁵ In Chapter 7 of the thesis we will show why analogues (such as popular base, fighting forces, and political leadership) of these three groups may be preferable to those listed by Clausewitz.

The ontological foundations of the trinity

The trinity, whilst complete in itself as a description of the nature of war, is built upon a number of central ontological suppositions which are not explicitly stated in the paragraphs in which the trinity is presented, but that are deemed by Clausewitz as fundamental to any understanding of war and are examined in other parts of *On War*. Three central foundations are suggested here: the human element; war's interactive nature; and the centrality of fighting. Together they underpin Clausewitz's opening definition that 'war is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will',⁶⁶ so we will examine them here.

A human social activity

Underlying all of Clausewitz's thoughts on war is the human element; the behaviour and interaction of humans in their social environment. Of all of war's dimensions, the humanistic element is the most enduring; it is always and everywhere an activity conducted by and between human groups. Clausewitz is ever at pains to emphasise this essential, but easily overlooked reality. As David Lonsdale notes, '*On War* presents us with a vision of war that is dominated by the human element.'⁶⁷ Of course, Clausewitz was well aware that humans throughout history have possessed radically different preconceptions, attitudes, and views of the world shaped by such things as cultural tradition, religious practice, and social norms: as he states, 'the human mind is far from uniform.'⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Clausewitz believed that underlying these forms there has always been, and always will be, a common nature to man from which derives the 'human condition', and which can help account for noticeable continuities in the behaviour of societies over time and across geographical and ethnic divides.

This perspective is easily and often overlooked because it is war's material and technological character that is perhaps most striking to the observer and captures the minds of military practitioners. Many theorists of war prior to and since Clausewitz have failed to adequately ground their theories in the

⁶⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 83.

⁶⁷ David Lonsdale, 'Clausewitz and Information Warfare', in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz*, pp. 233-34.

⁶⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 131.

reality that it is a human-centric activity. In modern times, this tendency has been exacerbated by the extent to which technology in its various forms – with perhaps its apotheosis in nuclear weapons and high-tech information technology – appears to dominate the conduct of war. The effect can be almost blinding in its capacity to divert attention from the basic fact that it is still humans that ultimately wield and employ such technology. Following Clausewitz, Gray reminds us that ‘the human element is the greatest of continuities in the long bloody history of warfare’⁶⁹ and as Knox notes, it is ultimately, ‘individuals – with their ambitions, vanities and quirks – [that] make strategy.’⁷⁰ Most telling, however, is the remark by North Vietnamese General Vo Nguyen Giap – one extremely well placed to assert this point: ‘In war there are two factors – human beings and weapons. Ultimately, though, human beings are the decisive factor. Human beings! Human beings!’⁷¹

Emphasising ‘the human’ in war and politics places Clausewitz in a tradition of thought most notably represented by such historical thinkers as Thucydides and Machiavelli.⁷² It may well be this central concern with human nature that explains the underlying similarities in their works. Thucydides hoped that his work would be ‘judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.’⁷³ Machiavelli, who rediscovered the human element in war following centuries of medieval providentialism,⁷⁴ stated that, ‘Everything that happens in the world at any time has genuine resemblance to what happened in

⁶⁹ Colin Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 376.

⁷⁰ MacGregor Knox, ‘Conclusion: Continuity and revolution in the making of strategy’, in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein, (eds.), *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 645.

⁷¹ Quoted in Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1994), p. 21.

⁷² Christopher Coker argues that this humanistic conception underpins the Western way of warfare and is rooted in ancient Greek thought, in which human agency was emphasised at the expense of God’s influence. Increasingly, progressing from Homer to the time of Thucydides, the Gods are relegated to the background and human will emphasised. Coker, *Waging War*, pp. 15-43.

⁷³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 48. In another famous passage Thucydides states (through the Athenian delegation at Sparta in 432 BC), ‘We have done nothing extraordinary, nothing contrary to human nature in accepting an empire when it was offered to us and then in refusing to give it up. Three very powerful motives prevent us from doing so – security, honour, and self-interest. And we were not the first to act in this way. Far from it’, p. 80.

⁷⁴ Coker, *Waging War*, p. 48.

ancient times. This is due to the fact that the agents who bring such things about are men, and that men have, and always have had, the same passions, whence it necessarily comes about that the same effects are produced.’⁷⁵ As Gat has noted, Machiavelli held that, ‘despite historical change, man and society remained, ‘in essence’, the same at all times and cultures, because human nature was immutable.’⁷⁶ Like both Thucydides and Machiavelli, the implications derived from ‘the human’ in war are rarely spelt out directly by Clausewitz, but rather allowed to reveal themselves throughout the text so that the reader becomes a ‘participant in the process of achieving conviction.’⁷⁷

The focus on the human factor in war also explains Clausewitz’s persistent concern with psychological and moral factors in war, not to mention the influence of personalities.⁷⁸ These forces pervade all aspects of the trinity in differing forms. In his historical works, Clausewitz was often at pains to delve into the unique psychology of individual commanders and, as Thucydides had done, of ordinary soldiers, as this could explain much about the conduct and course of war.⁷⁹ The trinity can in some respects be understood as reflecting fundamental aspects of human nature: the capacity to reason and judge the most appropriate means for given ends; the ability to imagine, create, and take action in the face of an unpredictable and uncertain future; and the proclivity for humans to be greatly influenced by deep-seated emotional impulses, irrational forces, spurious fictions, and psychological pressures. It is this fact which helps explain the trinity’s profound realism regarding the nature of war, anchored as it is in the underlying nature of those who conduct it. It also reminds us, as Gray comments, that ‘Time and again we humans demonstrate our willingness to do

⁷⁵ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. Leslie J. Walker (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 517.

⁷⁶ Azar Gat, ‘Machiavelli and the Decline of the Classical Notion of the Lessons of History in the Study of War’, *Military Affairs*, Vol. 52, No. 4, October 1998, p. 203.

⁷⁷ Paul A. Rahe, ‘Thucydides as educator’, in Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (eds.), *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 97.

⁷⁸ ‘Is there a field of human affairs where personal relations do not count, where the sparks they strike do not leap across all practical considerations. The personalities of statesmen and soldiers are such important factors that in war above all it is vital not to underrate them.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 107.

⁷⁹ In his ‘Observations on Prussia in Her Great Catastrophe’, Clausewitz devotes an entire section to biographical and psychological character profiles of the leading actors in the events. Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, pp. 42-63. Paret, in his introduction to the study, notes that these profiles show ‘psychological and stylistic brilliance’, p. 32.

quite literally *anything*.’⁸⁰ Furthermore, Clausewitz recognised that not only is war a human activity, it is also always a human *social* activity; it is waged collectively – as Gray notes, ‘individuals, as individuals, do not wage war.’⁸¹ This idea feeds into the following foundation of the trinity: the interaction of social entities in war.

Interaction – the duel

A saying has it that, ‘It takes two sides to make war. It only takes one side to make a massacre.’⁸² Likewise, Clausewitz was adamant that war is never simply the unilateral use of violence. Clausewitz perceptively, and somewhat counterintuitively perhaps, held that defence is the first true act of war, because without it the use of force is conquest without resistance:

War serves the purpose of the defense more than that of the aggressor. It is only aggression that calls forth defense, and war along with it. The aggressor is always peace-loving (as Bonaparte always claimed to be); he would prefer to take over our country unopposed. To prevent his doing so one must be willing to make war and be prepared for it.⁸³

Resistance thus lies at the heart of the idea of war and ‘total nonresistance would be no war at all.’⁸⁴ War, he describes, at the beginning of *On War* is comparable to a duel; it is violence met by violence. Yet, as Alan Beyerchen has noted, the analogy is more complex than the image of the aristocratic duel. The term used by Clausewitz is *Zweikampf*, which literally means ‘two-struggle’ and which he illustrates by the example of two wrestlers: this form of struggle is altogether more unpredictable, ‘generating positions and shapes that neither could possibly

⁸⁰ Gray, ‘Clausewitz rules’, p. 163. Later in this piece Gray notes that, ‘We humans have demonstrated that we are capable of committing, and are contingently willing to commit, any and every abomination’, p. 176.

⁸¹ Gray, *Bloody Century*, p. 378.

⁸² Attrib. 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment, 1991, Al Samawah.

⁸³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 444. Elsewhere Clausewitz states that ‘the concept of war does not originate with the attack because the ultimate object of the attack is not fighting: rather, it is possession. The idea of war originates with the defence, which does have fighting as its immediate object... It is thus the nature of the case that the side that first introduces the element of war, whose point of view brings two parties into existence, is also the side that establishes the initial laws of war. That side is the *defence*’, p. 451.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

create alone.’⁸⁵ It becomes clear when reading *On War* that it is the fundamental reality of this complex interaction which accounts for so much that is unique about the phenomenon. War, for Clausewitz, is a violent conflict of wills, a ‘collision’⁸⁶ or ‘conflict of living forces’⁸⁷ that, upon interaction, create new political and military realities that neither side fully controls. This has important implications for all tendencies of the trinity: it feeds into his discussion of the chance and uncertainty created as opponents act and react in unpredictable ways;⁸⁸ it accounts for the passions created through mutual hostility and fear; and it shapes the complex political relationships between belligerents, allies, and other third parties in war.

Clausewitz criticised earlier thinkers for their underestimation of this crucial aspect of war. They had developed dogmatic and prescriptive theories which purportedly offered near certain success if followed, forgetting that, any prescriptive theory in war inevitably runs up against an unavoidable and intractable problem: what happens if the enemy adheres to the same principles? In such cases surely the supposedly war-winning principles lose all meaning. Clausewitz wanted to emphasise that, ‘In war, the will is directed at an animate object that reacts.’⁸⁹ For the practitioner this must constantly be borne in mind because, as Clausewitz warns, ‘war is not waged against an abstract enemy, but against a real one who must always be kept in mind.’⁹⁰ There are further implications deriving from the importance of the interactive and dialectical nature of war which are explored throughout this study.

The centrality of fighting

Contrary to what his famous dictum – ‘war is merely the continuation of policy by other means’⁹¹ – might suggest, war, Clausewitz held, must ultimately be

⁸⁵ Alan Beyerchen, ‘Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery’. Available online at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Beyerchen/BeyerschenNonlinearity2.pdf>>, retrieved 20 April 2007.

⁸⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 86.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁸⁸ As Clausewitz states, an ‘attribute of military action is that it must expect positive reactions, and the process of interaction that results...[and] the very nature of interaction is bound to make it unpredictable.’ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

defined by its basic means, not by its purpose, because it is its unique means which distinguishes it from any other activity.⁹² For him, the means of war is fighting or combat, essentially, organised violence: war is an act of force. The possible political contexts and purposes of war can be endlessly varied, but at the heart of the concept is the act of physical violence, however it may be applied. This should not be seen as detracting from the importance of the political view, but Clausewitz was at pains to determine what distinguished his subject from any other. Echevarria describes fighting as the central feature of the Clausewitzian universe of war, just as Copernicus described the actual universe in terms of his heliocentric system.⁹³ This point is made abundantly clear when Clausewitz notes that, 'Essentially war is fighting, for fighting is the only effective principle in the manifold activities generally designated as war.'⁹⁴

This point is repeated in other sections of *On War*.⁹⁵ Even where political factors appear to be prominent in the course of a given war, often their importance rests upon expected military implications.⁹⁶ This might apply because of the changed calculus of relative strength implied, the superiority gained by new allies, the perceived futility of further resistance given changed political conditions,⁹⁷ and so forth. In such cases, 'action is undertaken in the belief that if the ultimate test of arms should actually occur, the outcome would be favourable.'⁹⁸ Clausewitz is at times brutally specific in his articulation of this point in order to ensure that there is no confusion: 'War is a clash between

⁹² Paret, *Clausewitz*, pp. 206-07.

⁹³ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 3.

⁹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 145.

⁹⁵ For instance in Book 1, Chapter 2 he states, 'However many forms combat takes, however far removed from the brute discharge of hatred and enmity of a physical encounter, however many forces may intrude which themselves part of fighting, it is inherent in the very concept of war that everything that occurs *must originally derive from combat*.' Ibid., p. 108.

⁹⁶ This point is clearly stated by Clausewitz in Book 3, Chapter 1: 'With the occupation of Bonaparte's capital in 1814, the objective of the war had been achieved. The political cleavages rooted in Paris came to the surface, and that enormous split caused the Emperor's power to collapse. Still, all this should be considered in the light of the military implications. The occupation caused a substantial diminution in Bonaparte's strength and his capacity to resist, and a corresponding increase in the superiority of the allies.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 213.

⁹⁷ Consider the West German Red Army Faction's (commonly known as the Baader-Meinhof Gang) decision to officially abandon its terrorist campaign in the late 1990s, based on its belief that the use of terrorist violence would not, given the massive change in political conditions between the 1970s and 1990s, contribute towards its objectives. In its final communiqué it stated that 'the urban guerrilla in the form of the raf [they did not use capital letters] is now history, the end of this project shows that we cannot succeed that way.' Stefan Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), p. 437.

⁹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 111.

major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed – that is the only way it differs from other conflicts.’⁹⁹

Clausewitz’s emphasis on fighting is not to say that he believed decisions or political outcomes could not be achieved without fighting, but that such outcomes were ultimately based on the perceived threat or expected effects of the use of force. So his thinking is appropriate to such forms of war as deterrence¹⁰⁰ or coercion where force is simply threatened: results can be produced ‘by the mere possibility of an engagement; the possibility has acquired reality.’¹⁰¹ This point is made clear when Clausewitz notes that,

Combat is the only effective force in war...That holds good even if no actual fighting occurs, because the outcome rests on the assumption that if it came to fighting, the enemy would be destroyed...All action is undertaken in the belief that if the ultimate test of arms should actually occur, the outcome would be favourable. The decision by arms is...in war what cash payment is in commerce...regardless how rarely settlements actually occur, they can never be entirely absent.¹⁰²

Fighting, however, can only be understood as part of the totality of war, even if it ultimately defines the subject: war, of course, encompasses much more than fighting. There are many ancillary activities that either facilitate, are preparatory to, or support the act of fighting, battle, or other forms of engagement.¹⁰³ We might include here marching, logistics, intelligence, diplomacy, propaganda, command, and so on. However, the idea of fighting – the contest of wills through both physical and psychological means – has to be a universal feature whether latent or actual, otherwise the whole subject begins to lose its defining character: ‘Fighting is the central military act; all other activities

⁹⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 173.

¹⁰⁰ This was the of course the central preoccupation of Cold War nuclear strategists. As Hedley Bull noted in 1968, attention ‘shifted away from war as an instrument of policy toward the threat of war, and studies of actual violence have given way to analyses of deterrence,’ ‘crisis management,’ ‘the manipulation of risk’ – or, as when it is practiced by our opponents rather than ourselves, ‘blackmail.’ Hedley Bull, ‘Strategic Studies and its Critics’, *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 4, July 1968, pp. 593-94.

¹⁰¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 212.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁰³ Clausewitz notes that, ‘Warfare comprises everything related to the fighting forces – everything to do with their creation, maintenance, and use.’ *Ibid.*, p. 108. Clausewitz repeats this point in Book 2, Chapter 1 when he notes ‘the art of war includes all activities that exist for the sake of war, such as the creation of fighting forces, their raising, armament, equipment, and training’, p. 146.

merely support it.’¹⁰⁴ Terrorism and insurgency, whilst often overwhelmingly political in character, are distinguished from other forms of political resistance, subversion, or activism by the violent nature of the means employed.¹⁰⁵ David Galula, in his classic text on insurgency, states the formula that, ‘A revolutionary war is 20 per cent military action and 80 per cent political’¹⁰⁶ – whilst that might be the case, the former figure cannot be dismissed as unimportant. As Clausewitz states, ‘Everything that occurs in war results from the existence of armed forces.’¹⁰⁷ The use of force may be sporadic, intermittent, and limited, but it is the fact of the threat or use of such violence, employed towards some political object, that lends such conflicts their particular form and makes them comprehensible within the theoretical framework as presented in the trinity: whether peacekeeping¹⁰⁸ or major war, fighting is the ‘strand that runs through the entire web of military activity and really holds it together.’¹⁰⁹

The status of the trinity today – a war of ideas

Colin Gray has written, ‘I believe neither that Clausewitz wrote the last words that are needed for a fully satisfactory theory of war, nor that some of his

¹⁰⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 268.

¹⁰⁵ In his classic study, Frank Kitson draws a distinction between subversion and insurgency based on the fact that the latter centres on ‘the use of armed force by a section of the people against the government’, whereas the former includes ‘all measures short of the use of armed force.’ Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, and Peacekeeping* (St. Petersburg, Florida: Hailer Publishing), p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006), p. 63.

¹⁰⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 108.

¹⁰⁸ Even peacekeeping is ultimately dependent on fighting. Whilst peacekeepers are tasked with ‘holding the line’ between belligerents and attain much of their authority from the imprimatur of the United Nations or other multinational regional bodies, they are still ultimately armed groups whose effectiveness is determined by an ability to use force when necessary. In Bosnia, UN forces were only mandated to deliver humanitarian relief and provide protection to convoys of released detainees in specific circumstances; force could only be used in self-defence. Lacking the requisite authority, the ultimate weakness of these arrangements – embodied in the idea of ‘safe areas’ – was disastrously revealed with the Srebrenica massacre of July 1995. As Smith notes, ‘If you stand in the middle of somebody else’s fight you must expect to be pushed around; and if you do intervene, decide if you are fighting one or all of the sides and get on with it – and be prepared to risk the force as allocated to the object.’ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 359. See also Paddy Ashdown, *Swords and Ploughshares: Bringing Peace to the 21st Century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

analysis could not stand some improvement.’¹¹⁰ In fact, there is evidence that Clausewitz himself would sympathise with this statement – as Paret suggests, he sought to develop a theory that was ‘capable of growth, of constant accretion.’¹¹¹ His theory, in common with the German philosophical tradition, gained its strength from, as Rudolf von Caemmerer put it, ‘its capacity for further development.’¹¹² Bassford has noted that ‘Clausewitz represents not an end point for speculation about war and its history but a solid foundation for further investigation’¹¹³ or as Michael Oakeshott once wrote, a ‘theorem is not an unconditional terminus; it, also, is an understanding waiting to be understood.’¹¹⁴

Most commentators, whether critical or sympathetic, broadly agree that ‘few writers have grappled with the sort of fundamental issues so astutely dissected by the great Prussian’¹¹⁵ or that, ‘although the international body of literature on defence studies is vast, general theories are distinguished by their extreme rarity. There are not even many incompetent imitators of Clausewitz.’¹¹⁶ Brian Bond notes that, ‘Few students of military history and strategy...dispute Clausewitz’s status as the outstanding theorist of war.’¹¹⁷ So, whilst many have attempted to breach the Clausewitzian edifice from any number of angles, few have launched an all out offensive in order to impose their own distinctive general theory of war. In the absence of any general theory to replace that of Clausewitz, unconnected and disparate attacks on his work may lead to strategic thinking typified by incoherence and miscomprehension. This study seeks neither to postulate an alternative to the trinitarian theory, nor argue that Clausewitz ‘got it right’. Rather, the central hypothesis lies somewhere in between these two poles, albeit with a bias towards the latter.

On the one hand, Clausewitz has endowed us with an unsurpassed general theory, which we would only abandon to our loss. Admittedly, our praise must not obscure the fact that Clausewitz was writing in a context

¹¹⁰ Colin Gray, ‘Clausewitz, History, and the Future Strategic World’, *The Occasional*, No. 47, June 2003, p. 2.

¹¹¹ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 155.

¹¹² Rudolph Caemmerer quoted in Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 334.

¹¹³ Bassford, ‘The Grand Tradition’.

¹¹⁴ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 2.

¹¹⁵ Steven Metz, ‘A Wake for Clausewitz: Toward a Philosophy of 21st Century Warfare’, *Parameters*, Winter 1994-95, p. 126.

¹¹⁶ Gray, ‘Clausewitz, History, and the Future Strategic World’, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 51.

significantly different, and in a time far removed, from our own. It would be expecting a great deal of his theory for it to carry the burden of two centuries of turbulent history and rapid change without weakening at the knees somewhat. As Howard notes, 'It remains the measure of his genius that, although the age for which he wrote is long since past, he can still provide so many insights relevant to a generation, the nature of whose problems he could not possibly have foreseen.'¹¹⁸ In this respect, Clausewitz is to war as Darwin is to evolution or Smith to *laissez-faire* economics: all pioneers and visionaries whose insights remain the standard against which subsequent theories are judged and, despite great strides in methodological techniques and the proliferation of detailed analysis in sub-fields, no holistic theories have successfully usurped their titles as subject defining theories.¹¹⁹

However, we should not cling dogmatically to any theory that can no longer sufficiently explain its subject in the light of rapid and significant change. Blind faith in anything is of little worth when evidence points in the opposite direction. Furthermore, in matters concerning war and strategy, more than in any other sphere of human affairs, save perhaps medicine or environmental science, resistance to alternative thinking resulting from a dogged belief in one perspective may ultimately cost human lives or even the existence of entire communities. Such a view is expressed by Stephen Metz who writes: 'Like adoration for some family elder, the veneration heaped on Clausewitz seems to grow even as his power to explain the world declines.' He claims that 'it is time to hold a wake so that strategists can pay their respects to Clausewitz and then move on.'¹²⁰ In this respect, commentators emphasising profound changes in the global social, political, and economic environment, and the concurrent transformative impact on the nature of war, are crucial in keeping us alive, both literally and figuratively, to the possibility that, put simply, 'things change.'

So, in recent years, an evident schism has emerged in the field between what may very broadly be termed, 'Clausewitzians' and 'anti-Clausewitzians.' Ironically, the study of war, as Skinner has remarked about political thought, has 'been disputed in a manner more reminiscent of the battlefield than the seminar

¹¹⁸ Michael Howard, 'The Influence of Clausewitz', in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 49.

¹¹⁹ A point stressed by Gray in his *Modern Strategy*.

¹²⁰ Steven Metz, 'A Wake for Clausewitz', *Parameters*, Winter 1994-95, pp. 126.

room.’¹²¹ The specific reasons given for anti-Clausewitzian arguments are numerous and varied. Some claim that we have entered into an era of so-called ‘new wars’ in which, due to the impact of globalisation and the rise of identity politics, war has undergone a fundamental change in its nature – war, for instance, is fought for economic gain by actors who wish to sustain the conflict rather than seek victory.¹²² Others claim that the rise of non-state warfare, in the form of irregular conflict, insurgency, guerrilla warfare, and terrorism renders obsolete a theory formulated in an age of major state warfare. From a somewhat different direction, some commentators argue that great changes in war’s material aspects – in the form of new information technologies and stand-off precision weaponry for instance – occasions Clausewitz’s irrelevance as a high-technology-led ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ promises to dissipate his famous ‘fog of war.’

Some anti-Clausewitzians such as John Keegan, Martin van Creveld, Ken Booth, and Jan Willem Honig believe – albeit for different reasons – that the continued adherence to Clausewitzian notions of war is cognitively blinkering,¹²³ strategically harmful,¹²⁴ or even poses a threat to civilisation.¹²⁵ Jan Willem Honig has argued that Clausewitz stands at the root of a putative modern strategic crisis.¹²⁶ All these critiques are united in their belief that, for

¹²¹ Skinner, Quentin, *Visions of Politics I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 7.

¹²² See for instance, Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

¹²³ Booth presents Clausewitz as the archetype of Western strategic thinking based on assumptions of perfect rationality and instrumentality. His basic argument – correct and important in itself – is that the belief that all other actors must be calculating to maximise outcomes according to a universal rational political logic, and based on what ‘we’ would do in that situation, can be harmful because opponents may react in culturally conditioned ways. Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), see in particular Chapter 4.

¹²⁴ Creveld argues that, as we enter into an era of irregular war, insurgency, and terrorism – which are not fought for any particular rational ‘interest’ – then we will be unable to understand or react to such changes if we continue to employ the existing Clausewitzian framework. Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

¹²⁵ The thrust of Keegan’s argument is that the dominance of the Clausewitzian philosophy – war as a continuation of politics – is the major cause of the bloody experience of the twentieth century and represents a great threat to civilisation, particularly in the context of the existence of nuclear weapons. Only by abandoning such conceptions and adopting more primitive, ritualised approaches to war – which limit it – can we avoid self-destruction. John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Pimlico, 2004). Elsewhere, Keegan has stated that Clausewitz developed the ‘most pernicious philosophy of warmaking yet conceived’ and that in doing so he ‘was polluting civilised thought about how wars could and should be fought.’ John Keegan, *War and Our World: The Reith Lectures 1998* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), pp. 41–42 and 43.

¹²⁶ Jan Willem Honig, ‘Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting’, in Gert de Nooy (ed.), *The Clausewitzian Dictum and the Future of Western Military Strategy* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997), p. 109.

whatever reason, Clausewitz is no longer, or never really was a reliable guide for understanding war. Also, it should be noted that a particular irony encountered in anti-Clausewitzian works is that they often – after rejecting Clausewitz – then make arguments that are fundamentally Clausewitzian; this makes critiquing the critiques a somewhat awkward and knotty task.¹²⁷

Devotees of Clausewitz generally deny either the depth or extent of the changes recognised by anti-Clausewitzians commentators – hence the continued relevance of *On War* – or believe that critics base their arguments on unfounded conceptions of Clausewitz's theory. Nevertheless, even those who claim contemporary relevance for Clausewitz have adopted mistaken interpretations of Clausewitz's trinity. These thinkers are potentially more harmful to our understanding of Clausewitz than anti-Clausewitzians, as the history of the reception of Harry Summers's conception of the secondary trinity confirms.¹²⁸ More recently, in an otherwise excellent and timely book by General Sir Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force*, a similarly misleading presentation of the trinity (as people, army, government) runs through the work.¹²⁹ Whatever its deserved popularity, it raises the prospect of new generations of students taking away partial and inaccurate conceptions of the Clausewitzian trinity.¹³⁰ This is not to say such interpretations of *On War* are completely wide of the mark – just as with many anti-Clausewitzian writers, they do get some, even many things right, and it is clear that parts of *On War* ostensibly support such representations.¹³¹

¹²⁷ So, for instance, Kaldor argues that Clausewitz is no longer relevant because there has been a revolution in military affairs, but 'a revolution in the social relations of warfare, not in technology.' Yet, Clausewitz would have found no difficulty in agreeing with Kaldor on this point, and moreover his theory is precisely intended to accommodate such change. Kaldor, *Old and New Wars*, p. 3.

¹²⁸ This will be explored further in Chapter 7. The basic point is that the popularity of Summers's reading of Clausewitz's trinity – as constitutive of the 'people, army, and government' – led to a proliferation of other works employing this mistaken, albeit potentially useful, conceptual framework, which was not the one Clausewitz wished to emphasise.

¹²⁹ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2005).

¹³⁰ The point is not necessarily to reject the substance of such authors' arguments, which may or may not be accurate, but to question their interpretation of the Clausewitzian framework on which they base their studies.

¹³¹ A similar problem was evident with earlier commentators – such as Basil Liddell Hart – who interpreted Clausewitz as a proponent of 'absolute war' (in the sense of something to aim towards, rather than as a purely logical ideal utilised for the purpose of theory). Such commentators could certainly draw upon many sections of *On War* to justify their assertions, but they did so selectively and without an accurate understanding of the development of Clausewitz's thought or the intellectual and philosophical context in which he wrote. In other words, they, like some still today, studied Clausewitz unhistorically.

Crucially, the true worth of his theory only becomes fully apparent with an accurate conception of the whole.

A road to reconciliation

So, commentators feel increasingly compelled to situate themselves in either one or the other camp and this has tended to generate overstated representations of aspects of Clausewitz's thought. This thesis suggests there is perhaps room for something of a theoretical reconciliation, or at least a narrowing of the apparent scholarly schism. Any putative reconciliation rests upon the belief that studies on either side of the divide contain a great deal of value in their substantive contributions and that, taken together, we can perhaps progress towards a clearer understanding of the nature of war. The two camps appear to talk past one another, when in fact there is potentially great room for mutually advantageous dialogue.¹³²

On the one hand, most writers who set themselves up as anti-Clausewitzian do so based upon limited and mistaken conceptions of Clausewitz (often based on popular secondary analyses which are themselves mistaken).¹³³ Their studies could benefit from greater historical perspective and a more thorough understanding of the theorist they grandly proclaim to be *passé*. On the other hand, Clausewitzians have perhaps been too resistant to the magnitude and scale of change in war since Clausewitz wrote or too unwilling to consider alternative theses. At the root of this particular problem lies the conception of the trinity, as this often serves as the central platform for both perspectives. It appears that the only potentially effective way forward is to return to the trinity itself and consider the arguments of the two camps based upon a more rigorous

¹³² Perhaps in a form of 'comparative advantage', whereby Clausewitzian scholars clarify aspects of his thought, whilst specialist analysts of modern war assess how their own research fits into Clausewitz's framework. This would certainly be preferable to unrealistic declarations of Clausewitz's theoretical death based on basic misunderstandings.

¹³³ As Bassford notes, 'Most readers (and that includes, unfortunately, many professional writers on military affairs and military history) take their understanding of Clausewitz from secondary and tertiary works like Keegan's [principally in his *A History of Warfare* (London: Pimlico, 2004)]. The signs of confusion stemming from Keegan's treatment are already evident.' Christopher Bassford, 'John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz', *War and History*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (November, 1994). The real danger of such works is that there is a good chance they will be more widely read than *On War* itself (such works are common set texts in most university and military educational syllabuses), thus presenting students unfamiliar with Clausewitz with distorted and, sometimes outright falsities.

understanding of its deeper meaning. This of course may prove inconclusive. Anti-Clausewitzian commentators may cling to their interpretations and Clausewitzians may doggedly refuse to abandon their faith in their master. There is considerable cause for pessimism about the prospects of such a reconciliation.

Objectives of the study

This study contends that a theoretical framework based firmly on a thorough understanding of the Clausewitzian trinity, may be capable of accommodating aspects of war that have emerged as a result of transformations in war's multiple contexts to alter the subjective manifestation of the three primary tendencies in the trinitarian framework.

The thesis does not purport to discover anything profoundly original in the nature of war. Nor does it engage in a detailed empirical analysis of contemporary conflict: modern scholarship is replete with highly erudite explorations into the multiplicitous aspects of modern war and strategy.¹³⁴ Whilst some reference will be made to recent studies and debates in the field, the modest object of the research is to transport Clausewitz's theory in to the twenty-first century as it faces increasing attacks upon its integrity. To achieve this, the study focuses on overcoming a number of central barriers to accurate comprehension of the trinity such as its ostensibly simplistic and misleading presentation, abstruse conceptual terminology, and complex substantive content. These areas all require clarification based upon a thorough conception of the methodological underpinnings, underlying foundations, and assumptions of the trinity. Also, the structure of the whole framework needs to be elucidated, both

¹³⁴ See in particular: Gray, *Bloody Century*; Bellamy, *Knights*; Smith, *The Utility of Force*; Wesley Clark, *Winning Modern Wars: Iraq, Terrorism, and the American Empire* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Michael Ignatieff, *The Warriors Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Vintage, 1999) and *Virtual War: Kosovo and beyond* (London: Vintage, 2001), Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*; Colin McInnes, *Spectator-Sport Warfare: The West and Contemporary Conflict* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2002); William Shawcross, *Deliver Us From Evil: Warlords and Peacekeepers in a World of Endless Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001); Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379 (London: Routledge, 2006); Herfried Münkler, *The New Wars* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005); and Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars* (London: Zed Books, 2002).

with respect to its three primary elements and the other various levels of war it encompasses; namely war's subjective manifestations and its multiple contexts.

So, the emphasis of the thesis is not on modern warfare per se. This interpretation may prove to be more accommodating to an understanding of modern war, but this thesis does not attempt to provide anything approaching proof in that respect. Also, it suggests that, even if students of Clausewitz consider and then reject certain substantive elements of his thought, Clausewitz's *approach* to his subject can serve as a shining example to any student of war. His commitment to historical study, the importance he placed on developing accurate and clear concepts, his struggle to walk the tight-rope of the particular and the universal, and his high standard for ensuring that all propositions in theory must closely reflect the reality of war – all contributed to the inherent worth of his work, and stand as testament to his status as a deeply profound thinker.

The thesis contests that war remains, with qualification, true to Clausewitz's original trinitarian conception. As Clausewitz taught us, 'all wars are things of the same nature',¹³⁵ the 'forms' of war are diverse and changing, its 'spirit' is universal.'¹³⁶ Whilst it is unarguable that the contexts within which wars are fought and the character of wars have changed considerably since Clausewitz wrote, this thesis suggests that war's deeper objective nature has not undergone any profound transformation. Perhaps, when considering the more extreme pronouncements of 'new wars' theorists, we should listen to Thucydides who commented that, 'Any novelty in an argument deceives you at once, but when the argument is tried and proved you become unwilling to follow it; you look with suspicion on what is normal and are the slaves of every paradox that comes your way.'¹³⁷ As Clausewitz stressed, there is an ever-present danger of treating one's own time as best, final, or most important¹³⁸ at the expense of

¹³⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 732.

¹³⁶ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 205.

¹³⁷ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, p. 214. Likewise, Gray perceptively comments that, 'The industry of academe, indeed the sheer industry of academics, is a potent source of error. Given that the canon (or cannon) lore of international relations already exists in a few 'sacred books,' that careers cannot be advanced simply by intoning the unholy liturgy, and that mere change ever tempts interpretation as transformation, it is not surprising that so much of the new writing in our field is either trivial, or wrong, or both.' Gray, 'Clausewitz rules', p. 164.

¹³⁸ This is reflected in Clausewitz's assertion that, 'Whoever relies purely on the perspective of his own times is inclined to treat what is most recent as best – and he finds it impossible to deal with what is exceptional or out of the ordinary.' Quoted in Hew Strachan, 'Clausewitz and the

historical perspective and expressions of universal value.¹³⁹ A number of excellent studies have already been produced along the lines proposed in this thesis, but they have generally only been of article or chapter length.¹⁴⁰ These works provide an excellent foundation, but a more extensive and detailed analysis is required.

Method

The analysis in this thesis is premised on a number of central methods. One that is of course fundamental to the study is a close interpretation of Clausewitz's work. In this sense the thesis is a textual analysis which critiques *On War* and from this analysis adds to a greater understanding of the correct nature of Clausewitz's thinking. It rejects claims such as J. F. C. Fuller's that *On War* is just 'a mass of notes, a cloud of flame and smoke.'¹⁴¹ There is a basic logic to the work and its central arguments can be comprehended with a close reading of the text. To bolster this interpretation of Clausewitz and to achieve the objectives set out above, this thesis adopts three overarching approaches: holism, contextual analysis, and critique. (In addition to these three central areas the analysis will also draw upon some measure of deductive reasoning, historical study,¹⁴² and the analysis of an extensive and rich body of secondary literature).

Holism

It is vital to understand that the concepts that comprise the trinity, and their unity, embody a whole range of insights which belies their seeming simplicity. They carry the weight of hundreds of pages of analysis – in *On War* and Clausewitz's other works – and a lifetime of study: the trinity can only be truly

Dialectics of War' in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 39.

¹³⁹ As Paret notes, the claim of perfection is 'one of those boasts with which every generation occasionally seeks to ornament the events of its own time' *Clausewitz and State*, p. 155.

¹⁴⁰ The best in this respect are: Bassford, 'The Primacy of Policy'; Gray, 'Clausewitz, History and the Strategic World'; and Bassford and Villacres, 'Reclaiming'.

¹⁴¹ J.F.C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War*. Available online at: <<http://cgsc.leavenworth.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/fuller2/fuller2.asp>>, retrieved 3 August 2008.

¹⁴² Due to the constraints of space, many of the historical examples utilised in this study will be dealt with in the relevant footnotes.

understood from this holistic perspective. Or, put differently, the ideas that comprise the trinity do not stand alone; they are inextricably dependent on a whole range of subordinate ideas and arguments. As Christopher Bassford has argued, this is why any ‘discussion of the trinity is so difficult to confine within tidy boundaries: any comprehensive examination must lead to every major issue in *On War*.’¹⁴³

Of course, a great many pages of *On War* are given over to tactical and operational matters, many of which ostensibly have little relevance to modern war, at least in substance if not in form.¹⁴⁴ Such issues have greater relevance if read, as Paret rightly suggests, as serving a theoretical function, rather than as prescriptive rules: they provide concrete instances of abstract phenomena and illustrate concepts which otherwise remain vague or ephemeral.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, reading *On War* is somewhat analogous to panning for gold: a difficult process of separating insights of timeless quality from those of primarily historical interest – a process complicated by the fact that some nuggets remain ensconced in worthless stone,¹⁴⁶ whilst other seemingly pure specimens turn out to be little more than fool’s gold.¹⁴⁷ This study is predominantly concerned with Clausewitz’s insights on the nature of war, rather than more specific, practical military strategic or tactical matters.¹⁴⁸ The trinity is much more than simply the sum of its component concepts and cannot be viewed in isolation; as a *total* idea it represents Clausewitz’s most original and lasting contribution to the study of

¹⁴³ Bassford, ‘The Primacy of Policy’, p. 75.

¹⁴⁴ For instance, Book 5 on Military Forces can appear hopelessly outdated, however a more forgiving appreciation reveals the continued relevance of some of its arguments and ideas. In his commentary of *On War* Bernard Brodie wrote that Book 5 will ‘appeal more to the military historian than to the modern student of war. Still...it is not without passages of extraordinary interest to the latter.’ Bernard Brodie, ‘A guide to the reading of *On War*’, in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 810. Some more general ideas such as the ‘culminating point of victory’ or the ‘centre of gravity’, can be useful if broadly conceived and mindful of accompanying qualifications.

¹⁴⁵ Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993), p. 204.

¹⁴⁶ Such as discussion of tactical and technical issues that appear to have no universal relevance beyond the problems of Clausewitz’s day, but which in fact are intended to convey a deeper truth about a certain aspect of war.

¹⁴⁷ This relates to those principles which many subsequent interpreters have paraded as Clausewitz’s final words, but which turn out to be heavily qualified and dependent on circumstance for their validity: they are valued beyond their true worth based on appearance rather than substance. An example would be the principle of the annihilation of the enemy forces.

¹⁴⁸ Although inevitably such issues will feed into the discussion.

war: his ‘final synthesis.’¹⁴⁹ To consider the trinity without a broader reading and understanding of its genesis can engender significant misinterpretation, which in turn creates fertile ground for mistaken critiques.¹⁵⁰

Clausewitz in context

The interpretation of historical texts is far from unproblematic and raises important methodological issues. Such issues have generated a large literature – of which we can only scratch the surface here – and there exists a diverse range of opinions as to the most appropriate exegetical approaches. These issues reflect general issues in historical methodology which have come to the fore in recent decades, particularly in response to the rise of post-modernist critique. It is useful to briefly consider what might be considered the extreme poles in the debate, before considering the crucial influence of the Cambridge School in the history of ideas. This brief overview provides a means of situating the method adopted in this study.

At one extreme, traditional hermeneutics is associated with the kind of positivistic empiricism propounded by Comte in the nineteenth century. In this view, the interpretation of historical texts presents no significant problems other than that of simply rereading texts until the meaning becomes clear.¹⁵¹ This reflects the rationalist strain in historical scholarship – most famously associated with Sir Geoffrey Elton¹⁵² – which essentially holds that the facts will speak for themselves if one becomes a ‘servant to the sources.’¹⁵³ As Skinner states, it has often been held that ‘there is nothing very problematic about the business of

¹⁴⁹ Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, trans. C. Booker and N. Stone (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 69

¹⁵⁰ Aron expresses this opinion when he states that *On War*, ‘can only be understood as a whole, the meaning being determined by the structure of the whole.’ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁵¹ Robert Alun Jones, ‘Review Essay: On Quentin Skinner’, *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 87, No. 2, September 1981, p. 454.

¹⁵² Quentin Skinner focuses on F. C. Hood as a prime example of such thinking (relating to the idea of the sufficiency of a concentration of the texts ‘for themselves’) in the study of political thought, Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 81.

¹⁵³ Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997), p. 230. As Skinner points out, for the empiricists, concentration on context only diverts attention from the primary task of simply determining what the great thinkers had to say about the issues of perennial relevance. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, p. 57.

anatomising the contents and arguments',¹⁵⁴ of certain texts. Certainly, a close reading of *On War* is deemed essential here, but this does not unlock the full meaning of some of the concepts and ignores crucial methodological problems – such as the relationship between the subject and the object of enquiry – many of which have been dramatically exposed by postmodern critics on the other extreme of the debate.

Postmodernist theorists have defended a form of interpretative 'hyper-relativism' in which 'interpretation is everything',¹⁵⁵ the language we employ embodies an 'infinite play of significations',¹⁵⁶ and texts change their meaning every time they are read.¹⁵⁷ In this view, the search for objective meaning in history is futile, and this has 'deepened scepticism about the traditional humanist project of interpreting texts.'¹⁵⁸ The extreme subjectivity of post-modernists suggests that even attempting to situate earlier thinkers in historical context is pointless because it is mistaken to believe we can ever arrive at 'true' readings; all interpretations will be ineluctably shaped by the interpreter and all outcomes only amount to spurious 'reality effects',¹⁵⁹ containing little more objective truth than literary fiction.¹⁶⁰ Whilst this study rejects such extreme relativism, these theories have nevertheless usefully opened our thinking to critical notions about the nature of historical knowledge and prompted a move away from a naive realism.¹⁶¹

Postmodernism has undeniably encouraged greater self-reflexivity and the active consideration of the relationship between a text, the author, the interpreter and their various contexts, all of which are essential to rigorous historical scholarship and which rigid empiricist approaches ignore at their

¹⁵⁴ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, p. 72.

¹⁵⁵ Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 224.

¹⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁵⁷ Keith Jenkins states that 'It is clear that the past doesn't exist 'historically' outside of historians' textual, constructive appropriations, so that, being made by them, it has no independence to resist their interpretative will, not least at the level of meaning.' Keith Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, p. 90.

¹⁵⁹ Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 127.

¹⁶⁰ Hence postmodernism's strong attachment to, and extensive use of, the techniques and methods of literary criticism.

¹⁶¹ Which, as Evans argues throughout his work, has not necessarily bedevilled historical scholarship to the extent that some postmodernists suggest. Evans, *In Defence of History*.

peril.¹⁶² It has also taught us to approach texts with greater care and caution. Yet, contrary to what post-modernists assert, not all interpretations of a text are equally valid and the influences of the particular perspectives of the interpreter need not entail the complete distortion of the evidence. There are grounds for assessing the integrity and the probable accuracy of an interpretation (whilst not necessarily arguing for its final truth).¹⁶³ As Evans argues, the words of a text are not capable of an infinity of meanings.¹⁶⁴ For instance, some interpretations of Clausewitz have clearly been based on a limited and narrow reading of *On War*. Whilst we might never be able to finally determine the ‘real’ Clausewitz, we can however progress to more accurate understandings of his work and the concepts he employs. The Cambridge School of hermeneutics represents a fruitful way forward to achieve such understanding without falling into the worst methodological pitfalls of either extreme outlined above.

In the 1960s Quentin Skinner, drawing on the work of other important scholars,¹⁶⁵ developed an influential methodology (principally in relation to political thought, but with implications for the interpretation of texts more generally) which primarily sought to treat texts as historical events in themselves, embedded in their own unique historical contexts. This, Skinner has argued, would help scholars avoid the various mythologies of doctrines, coherence, and prolepsis in historical exegesis, each generated by ‘setting’ a text within distorting preconceived paradigms and present-day categories.¹⁶⁶ To achieve this Skinner advocates a methodology focused on authorial intentions – an analysis of what the author was ‘*doing*’ in writing what they did – which

¹⁶² In Evans’s opinion postmodernism has encouraged historians to ‘look more closely at documents...to interrogate their own methods and procedures as never before...has made them more self-critical...led to a greater emphasis on open acknowledgement of the historian’s own subjectivity.’ Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 248.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 219. As Evans notes, ‘interpretations really can be tested and confirmed or falsified by an appeal to the evidence; and some of the time at least, it really is possible to prove that one side is right and the other is wrong. What counts as evidence is not determined solely by one historians perspective, but is subject to a wide measure of agreement which transcends the individual’, p. 128.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 106.

¹⁶⁵ R. G. Collingwood, J. G. A Pocock, and John Dunn stand out in this respect. For an overview of the evolution of the Cambridge School in the context of British academic history see Brian Young, ‘Intellectual History in Britain’, in Richard Whatmore and Brian Young, *Palgrave Advances in Intellectual History* (Eastbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 25-48.

¹⁶⁶ These issues are dealt with in detail in Skinner’s famous article, originally published in 1969, entitled ‘Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas’. Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, pp. 57-89.

requires, amongst other things, a detailed understanding of the linguistic conventions within which the author wrote.¹⁶⁷

This study essentially adopts a Skinnerian approach,¹⁶⁸ but does not entirely subscribe to the strongly relativistic stance which Skinner defends.¹⁶⁹ In essence, Skinner can be seen to have recovered meaning from the postmodernists, but in so doing largely denies any timeless relevance to the ideas in the historical texts we study.¹⁷⁰ Contrary to Skinner's conclusion in this respect, this approach need not entirely negate the relevance of ideas for the present, provided we are mindful not to let our present concerns excessively dictate our interpretation of past thinkers. As Joseph Femia has argued, an historicist approach does not necessarily deny that certain issues and problems recur in different contexts;¹⁷¹ the forms of the questions and issues may change, but their essential nature persists, thus past thinkers can perhaps contribute to our thinking about present problems.¹⁷² Borrowing from Skinner, we will consider concepts in the light of Clausewitz's times, whilst also employing traditional historicist contextual methods of exploring the wider social, cultural, and political landscape of the period to draw out the central meaning of the text (which, it is argued, is capable of transcending Clausewitz's immediate context and informing contemporary debate). Certainly there may be limitations to the

¹⁶⁷ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, pp. 82-83.

¹⁶⁸ As Skinner notes, 'if we want the history of philosophy written in a genuinely historical spirit, we need to make it one of our principal tasks to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts as enable us to make sense of what their authors were doing in writing them.' *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁶⁹ Skinner notes that his approach entails a recognition that 'there are no timeless concepts, but only the various different concepts which have gone with various different societies...' *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁷⁰ He states that 'Any statement is inescapably the embodiment of a particular problem, and thus is specific to its context in a way that it can only be naïve to try to transcend. The implication is not merely that the classic texts are concerned with their own questions and not with ours; it is also that...there are no perennial problems in philosophy.' *Ibid.*, p. 88. Joseph Femia states that Skinner treats the 'ideas of our ancestors as purely historical phenomena, forever locked into their determinate contexts.' Joseph V. Femia, 'An historicist critique of 'revisionist' methods for studying the history of ideas', *History and Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 2, May 1981, p. 116.

¹⁷¹ Femia, 'historicist critique', pp. 113-34.

¹⁷² As Femia notes, 'The goal of historicism, properly conceived, is not to devastate the entire philosophical legacy of mankind, but (primarily) to ensure that positions of the past are not arbitrarily detached from their explanatory context and simply reproduced in the present, without due regard for subsequent intellectual discoveries or changed social conditions...the historicist need not operate on the facile assumption that past ideas are entirely and inextricably bound up in a straitjacket of particular circumstances, particular questions, and particular intentions.' *Ibid.*, pp. 126-27.

application of Clausewitz's ideas imposed by the nature of the times he lived in, but this does not entail total irrelevance.

The analysis in this thesis adheres to the belief that ideas are formed as a result of the various experiences of, and dominant influences on the thinker in question, and can only be truly comprehended based upon a firm knowledge of such factors. If we are to comprehend the meaning of Clausewitz's ideas in order to shed light on contemporary debates we must first seek to understand Clausewitz historically. This will provide us with a firmer basis upon which to take the trinity forward. The trinity did not spontaneously appear, but was the product of a deeply encultured man living in a world far removed from our own. The meaning of the concepts comprising the trinity will become clearer if we can determine what inspired them.¹⁷³ As Gat rightly states, 'what people think cannot be separated from the question of how they think, or from the circumstances in which they operate and to which they react.'¹⁷⁴

No simple categorisation of Clausewitz's thought into any one intellectual tradition is possible – for instance, he admired the Romantics' emphasis on the inner world of the individual but did not share their invocation of a 'surrender to emotion.'¹⁷⁵ His intellectual sympathies appear to have fluctuated significantly throughout his life as he digested a great variety of literature, history, and philosophy, at times adopting certain ideas, whilst at others rejecting them. It should also be stressed that it was in the nature of the way Clausewitz worked to draw 'scraps of ideas at second and third hand from his cultural environment.'¹⁷⁶ Also, Raymond Aron is right to assert that *On War* arose from Clausewitz's *own* conception of things.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷³ As Paret states, 'The relationship of Clausewitz to the physical and intellectual world in which he lived is important and deserves study for its own sake. But its exploration also opens a useful perspective on his writings.' Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 4.

¹⁷⁴ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 256.

¹⁷⁵ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 149.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁷⁷ Aron, *Philosopher of War*, p. 232. A number of authors have already studied, in some depth, the various influences on the development of Clausewitz's thought – the work of Paret, Aron, and Gat stand out in this respect. These studies are marked by a wide range of opinion and debates have raged over the extent to which certain philosophers influenced Clausewitz's thought (in particular over the debt Clausewitz owed to Kant and Hegel). The study makes use of this literature and the purpose is not to fundamentally question their valuable analyses, but rather to reconsider and orientate their findings more specifically in relation to the trinity. New interpretations are always possible but, more importantly, most of the existing forays into this subject are, despite the erudition of the authors, somewhat unspecific: by assessing key influences through the prism of the trinity, hopefully a clearer picture will emerge. Importantly, the focus

Critique and a new interpretation

Analysis of the trinity will be further strengthened if we consider its central philosophical claims and propositions in the light of critical or antithetical ideas. Over the years since the publication of *On War*, a number of commentators have, both wittingly and unwittingly, developed arguments that challenge some of the fundamental ideas contained in the trinity. By exposing the trinity to such alternative perspectives our understanding will be significantly heightened, as we will be forced to justify why Clausewitz reached the conclusions he did and why we should continue to value them. The study will primarily refer to a handful of authors, books, and articles which directly challenge Clausewitz's ideas, and that are judged to be based on more than a passing acquaintance with *On War*. These criticisms will not be considered in isolation; rather their ideas will be woven into the thesis where relevant.

As noted, given the tendency to axiomatise and universalise Clausewitz, we must remain open to serious and reasoned critiques: as Thomas Carlyle had it, 'The greatest of faults, I should say, is to be conscious of none.'¹⁷⁸ This study does not suggest Clausewitz is without blemish or flaw. We must remain alive to potential shortcomings in Clausewitz's ideas and thus listen to constructive critique attentively: we should not view *On War* as 'Holy Writ'¹⁷⁹ and, as Che Guevara noted of his *Guerrilla Warfare*, 'we offer an outline, not a bible.'¹⁸⁰

War's nature versus strategy

It must be made clear what the trinity purports to explain and what it does not. The trinity explains war in its entirety. It should not initially be approached

here is on the meaning of the trinity, not the influences on Clausewitz's thought per se. Apart from its intrinsic interest, the latter is primarily deemed integral to this study in so far as it sheds light on the former.

¹⁷⁸ Thomas Carlyle, 'The Hero as Prophet', in *Heroes and Hero Worship* (1928).

Available online at: <<http://www.online-literature.com/thomas-carlyle/heroes-and-hero-worship/2/>>, retrieved 12 May 2008.

¹⁷⁹ Colin S. Gray, 'Clausewitz, History, and the Future Strategic World', *The Occasional*, No. 47, June 2003, p. 24.

¹⁸⁰ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 92.

within the modern conventional mindset, which divides the subject into quite neat, if often misunderstood, conceptual categories or ‘levels’ of war from the political-strategic to the tactical. Approaching the trinity with such a mindset may lead to more confusion than clarification. This is not to deny the importance of such concepts for understanding war, particularly with respect to the practical art of strategy – indeed, Clausewitz was an important figure in developing the meaning of some of these terms – and the trinity has important implications at all those levels.

In modern works, the trinity is frequently invoked to explain strategic behaviour and outcomes, such as in Rupert Smith’s recent *The Utility of Force*. Whilst this is not necessarily mistaken, and doing so can be a highly valuable exercise, this study holds that the trinity should principally be understood in a broader philosophical light. At its primary level, it is an exploration into the fundamental nature of war, considered as a whole, and in relation to other areas of social reality. It is not intended as a strategic model. That the conception of the nature of war has direct consequences for strategic planning or analysis goes without saying: practical strategy cannot escape the phenomenon of which it is part. This is not to say that to be successful strategically one requires an understanding of the nature of war – sometimes pure luck may suffice – but we can only assume it would help a great deal. As some scholars have argued, the way we perceive the nature of war can strongly shape strategic approaches.¹⁸¹ Clausewitz’s trinity explains something more fundamental than strategy: it considers the ‘universe of war’ in which strategy operates.

Strategy can be viewed as an ever-present element of war, in so far as wherever there is war there will be strategic outcomes – political consequences of the use of force – even for actors not consciously adopting any *particular* strategy. But strategy is only one of the permanent aspects of war and is not coextensive with its holistic nature. Of course, strategy, properly understood and as masterfully explained by Gray, encompasses all levels of war to the extent that it owes its existence to policy, whilst being entirely dependent on the tactical elements that ‘do’ strategy.¹⁸² In this sense, strategy is ‘fundamentally

¹⁸¹ Antulio J. Echevarria II, ‘Clausewitz and the Nature of the War on Terror’, in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz*, p. 198.

¹⁸² Gray, *Modern Strategy*.

continuous and indivisible: continuous through peace and war, indivisible from the actions of the squad leader to those of the highest command authority.¹⁸³ Whilst entirely accepting these propositions, we hold that the trinity seeks to explain not just the nature of strategy, but the nature of war as a whole. The trinity draws upon insights derived from those engaged in the sharp-end of war, to the commanders in charge of campaigns, to the politicians in the capitals, to the ordinary citizens in the towns and villages, and incorporates all these perspectives within war's eternal and shifting contexts. War's nature, Clausewitz believed, can only be understood through consideration of all its dependent and inter-connected elements.

Overview of the thesis

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. The second chapter deals with Clausewitz's theory and method, serving as a basis on which to explore his substantive ideas. The third chapter considers the vital subject of context in relation to the trinity. The subsequent three chapters – four, five, and six – deal explicitly with each of the primary elements of the trinity: politics, chance, and passion. These form the core of the thesis and all follow a similar logic composed of three main sections: background, influences, and precedents; explorations; and implications. The penultimate chapter – ‘interactions’ – draws these separate strands of analysis together, and considers the trinity as an integrative whole. The eighth and final chapter offers some conclusions and reflections.

It must be stressed that the decision to divide the chapters in this manner is motivated primarily by the need for analytical clarity rather than a belief that war is in reality so neatly divisible; indeed it is important to stress the interplay that defines the relationships between the tendencies. For this reason, no matter how these issues are approached or divided for analytical purposes, an element of repetition is unavoidable. Nevertheless, it is helpful, and indeed, correct to emphasise a strong measure of separateness between the elements of the trinity – as the structure of the thesis indicates – not only because there are clearly three

¹⁸³ Bassford, Christopher, ‘Policy, Politics, War, and Military Strategy’ Available online at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/StrategyBook/WholeThing.html>>, retrieved 4 November 2007.

distinct and differentiated elements in the trinity, but, moreover, Clausewitz specifically wanted to draw attention to the unique nature of each of the areas of human social reality he had identified as comprising the nature of war, whatever their overlap in reality.

Questions of definition

Definitions of war are extremely problematic. This thesis, while not trying to side-step the problem does not provide a definitive definition because, in essence, the entire study is an analysis of precisely that. Nevertheless, a few words can be noted on the matter. The key dilemma facing the theorists is to establish a definition which is neither too broad nor too narrow. A definition that attempts to stretch the strategic imagination to include every possible social activity that could potentially be described as some form of 'war' runs the serious risk of engendering an extremely diluted theory based upon the lowest common denominators that connect such a broad array of unlike activities. A good example of this is the attempt to squeeze organised crime and counter-narcotic campaigns into a definition of war – such activity uncomfortably straddles the boundaries between law enforcement and organised conflict.¹⁸⁴ Another example might include the decision of the U.S. administration, in the wake of the 11 September terrorist attacks of 2001, to declare a 'war on terror.'¹⁸⁵ Certainly, the American response has involved the use of force – including two significant campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq – but terrorism is a tactic of warfare, and it is not possible to wage war on a tactic.

In a slightly different sense we must be careful to stress the reciprocal nature of war or we run the risk of conflating what are in principle, two very different types of socially organised violence; one can be seen as a gross

¹⁸⁴ This is not to argue that organised crime does not importantly feed into or affect certain conflicts. As Gray notes, 'In theory the distinction is crystal clear: to be classed as warfare, violence must be motivated by politics, not profit, as is the case with criminal behaviour. In practice, though, the political and the criminal tend to merge.' Colin Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 250.

¹⁸⁵ As Michael Howard has argued, this is a dangerous and 'irrevocable' error because of: the legitimacy it bestowed on the terrorists; the 'war psychosis' it engendered; the military means it automatically yet inappropriately demanded, and for establishing an expectation that 'victory' can indeed be achieved. Michael Howard, 'What's in a Name?', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 1, January/February 2002, pp. 8-13.

violation of human rights, where only one of the belligerents possesses violent means, and the other being war. War presupposes two or more social actors both who have the means to use force. This reasoning precludes acts such as genocide from our definition of a state of war – such acts represent massive human rights violations or war crimes. Thus, while such acts may take place within war or take the form of a particular means of waging war, the use of violence against unarmed civilians in itself does not constitute war. This, as we have seen, reflects Clausewitz's foundational belief in the interactive nature of war.

On the other hand, our definition must not be too narrow so that important instances of organised armed violence are left out of our analysis of war. In this sense, the definition of war as armed conflict between states is far too parochial; with a stroke of the pen it discounts perhaps the vast majority of instances of conflict in the modern era such as civil wars, insurgencies, terrorist campaigns, and armed secessionist movements. It is clear that war can take a number of forms that do not necessarily involve states, or where states are only one of the belligerents. Our definition must be able to incorporate such organised violence waged for political objectives.

The basic definition of war this thesis adopts is the classically Clausewitzian definition of war employed by Hedley Bull. For him, war is 'organised violence carried on by political units against each other. Violence is not war unless it is carried out in the name of a political unit; what distinguishes killing in war from murder is its vicarious and official character, the symbolic responsibility of the unit whose agent the killer is.'¹⁸⁶ Defining war in reality, or what Bull terms 'material war,'¹⁸⁷ is more difficult. At this point it is appropriate to refine our definition to incorporate not simply the use of force but also the threat of the use of force. Gray offers a useful definition which captures this important aspect: 'war is organised violence threatened or waged for political purposes.'¹⁸⁸ It is also important from the outset to stress the point that war is a social phenomenon and 'can only be performed in and by societies.'¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), p. 178.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁸⁸ Gray, *Bloody Century*, p. 30.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

But, ultimately, perhaps Clausewitz's own pithy definition is to be preferred: 'war is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.'¹⁹⁰

In an unfinished note written in 1827, towards the end of his life, Clausewitz drafted the prophetic statement that, 'If an early death should terminate my work, what I have written so far would, of course, only deserve to be called a shapeless mass of ideas. Being liable to endless misinterpretation it would be the target of much half-baked criticism.'¹⁹¹ This fact constitutes one of the chief obstacles impeding Clausewitz's modern appreciation, whilst simultaneously explaining his 'reputation as a profound thinker' because, due to the difficulty of discovering his 'true meaning', he 'could never have been wrong or less than profound.'¹⁹² This thesis rests on the assumption that problems of analysis not only derive from the fact that Clausewitz's work is unfinished and intellectually hard to master, but simply because the subject – war – is so vast, endlessly complex, and can be approached from so many possible angles. As Clausewitz states, those who realise 'how many vitally important matters are involved in war will understand what unusual mental gifts are needed to keep the whole picture steadily in mind.'¹⁹³ Nevertheless, Clausewitz has provided students of war with an invaluable platform from which to commence a journey into the heart of the phenomenon. This study is motivated by a desire, like Clausewitz, to delve 'beneath the surface of strategy and tactics to explore the phenomenon of war itself, to study its structure, its internal dynamic, its links with other elements of social existence'¹⁹⁴ and our 'aim is not to provide new principles and methods of conducting war; rather, we are concerned with examining the essential content of what has long existed, and to trace it back to its elements.'¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 83.

¹⁹¹ Clausewitz, 'Note of 10 July 1827', in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 77.

¹⁹² Gat, *Military Thought*, pp. 254-55.

¹⁹³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 208.

¹⁹⁴ Paret, 'Clausewitz', p. 186.

¹⁹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 466.

CHAPTER TWO

Theoretical Foundations

Not what we have argued but the manner in which we have argued may,
we believe, benefit theory.¹

Carl von Clausewitz.

Before proceeding to a detailed analysis of the separate elements of the trinity, it is first necessary to explore the methodological and theoretical foundations on which Clausewitz constructs his concept of the trinity, and to determine where his work stands in relation to the broader historical development of military thought. After presenting the central concepts of the trinity, Clausewitz explains that to ensure a dynamic theoretical balance between the tendencies, an appropriate approach to the subject is required.² As will become clear, the methods he employs to fulfil his intellectual objectives significantly shape the outcome of his work and an appreciation of these foundations is vital for understanding the trinity. Also, knowledge of his approach is valuable not only for the added insight it provides, but also as a model of rigorous methodological endeavour for students of war attempting to come to grips with such a vast and complex subject.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first provides a general background to the cultural and intellectual environment in which Clausewitz worked, and from which he drew many of his methodological devices. It assesses the influences of the Enlightenment spirit of rational and scientific enquiry, the German Movement, and the historicist school. The second section examines Clausewitz's approach to theory in greater detail. It considers Clausewitz's views on the purpose and limits of theory and the various methods he employed. It examines in some detail a number of the central theoretical

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, 'Strategic Critique of the Campaign of 1814 in France', in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 208.

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993), p. 101.

problems he attempted to resolve in his work. The chapter concludes by relating all these issues back to the trinity.

Background, influences, and precedents

Born in 1780, Clausewitz's life was to straddle a period in human history during which, as described by eminent military historian Michael Howard, the 'framework of European society...was shaken to its foundations.'³ In many respects Clausewitz was born in the old regime and, upon his death on 16 November 1831, was laid to rest in the modern world. From a broad perspective, and with the benefit of hindsight, the preceding eighteenth century world would appear to historians such as H. G. Wells as nothing more than an 'interregnum' or 'political pause' before the 'profound social and political forces of disintegration' were unleashed throughout Europe in the aftermath of the Revolution.⁴ Clausewitz not only lived through these turbulent times but was an active participant in some of the great events of the era: the Wars of the First Coalition against France, the Battle of Auerstedt, Napoleon's disastrous Russian campaign, and Waterloo. That Clausewitz was witness to, and participant in such momentous events undoubtedly contributed to the vitality of his work.

As Paret argues, it is difficult to imagine any age lending itself less to intellectual expressions of universal value.⁵ It was all too easy for those living through such epoch-changing events to either become overwhelmed by the particularities of the age or to claim history had reached its grand conclusion. Momentous change and seemingly cataclysmic events often induce declarations as to the unprecedented and unique nature of the present at the expense of historical perspective. This is perhaps reflected in the apparent 'outbreak of endism'⁶ in recent years as popularly manifested in the 'End of History' thesis proposed by Francis Fukuyama following the end of the Cold War⁷ and the

³ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 75.

⁴ H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (London: Cassell, 1920), pp. 446-47.

⁵ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 8.

⁶ Andrew Gamble, *Politics and Fate* (Cornwall: Polity, 2000), p. 2.

⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).

prospect of an end to ‘major war’ as described by John Mueller.⁸ It could be argued that Clausewitz’s contemporary and, in many respects, great military intellectual rival of the time, General Antoine Henri Jomini⁹ succumbed precisely to such a fate and paradoxically developed a theory so strongly influenced by and dependent upon the Napoleonic experience that he failed to provide the timeless ‘scientific principles’¹⁰ of strategy he professed to have unearthed. There is strong evidence to suggest that much of the content of *On War* is primarily concerned with Napoleonic or ‘major’ warfare – in relation to which the importance of the great decisive battle and the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces took precedence – and that it was only in his later years that Clausewitz developed a more comprehensive and politically astute theory.¹¹

Although Clausewitz’s work is inevitably influenced by the character of contemporary warfare, his profound sense of history,¹² sensitivity to change in human affairs, and searching mind loosened the tight grip of the present on his thought. As Howard has contended, ‘Few if any other writers have succeeded as he did in transcending the limitations imposed on their insights by the...circumstances of their times.’¹³ If this was true with regard to the events of his day, Clausewitz should equally be considered as one amongst a number of pioneering thinkers who were beginning to transcend the intellectual hegemony of the European Enlightenment. In the realm of military theory he would be the first to truly break free of such mental chains, although the foundations had certainly been laid by his predecessors in a number of respects.

⁸ John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

⁹ Antoine Henri de Jomini (1779-1869).

¹⁰ John Shy, ‘Jomini’, in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 146.

¹¹ See Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz’s On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), p. 79. Some have even claimed that Napoleonic warfare is notably absent from his work. Fuller states that ‘it is not a study based on the Napoleonic wars’ and ‘in spite of his twenty years of Napoleonic warfare, Clausewitz had but a vague understanding of it.’ J. F. C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War 1789-1961* (New Jersey: Da Capo Press, 1992), pp. 60 and 75-76.

¹² As Paret notes, seven of the ten volumes that comprise Clausewitz’s posthumous works are principally historical narratives and analyses. Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993), p. 130.

¹³ Michael Howard, *Clausewitz: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 1.

Enlightenment: the spirit of enquiry

In general terms, late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Germany was a place of rich, varied, and profound cultural activity, perhaps comparable to the ‘golden age’ of Athens in the fifth century BC in terms of the sheer quantity of rich artistic, philosophical, and literary output.¹⁴ Such intense activity was largely a reaction to the cultural hegemony of the French Enlightenment that had held sway over European thought for most of the eighteenth century and, subsequently, to the upheavals engendered by the French Revolution. Clausewitz was to be heavily influenced by this great cultural backlash, yet our exploration into the roots of his approach must begin in the European Enlightenment.

Although the phase in the history of European thought known to us as the Age of Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, should be understood as consisting of a confused ‘bundle of attitudes’ – there certainly was no ‘united army of the enlightened’¹⁵ and the figurative ‘republic of letters’ was inhabited only by leading intellectuals¹⁶ – we can at least draw out some of its major threads. The Enlightenment was, for Kant, the period in which ‘Mankind grew out of its self-inflicted immaturity.’¹⁷ In broad terms it can be seen as a reaction to the superstition, intolerance, and religious fanaticism of the medieval world-view,¹⁸ and which sought to throw the light of reason upon all manner of phenomena through the processes of free thought: the route to truth no longer began with ‘Authority’ in its various guises, but with doubt.¹⁹ It emerged principally from the scientific and philosophical revolutions of the mid to late seventeenth century – characterised especially by the inductive Baconian method, Sir Isaac Newton’s pioneering *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* of 1687, and the

¹⁴ This point is also made by Karl Ameriks with regard to the philosophical school of German Idealism. Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. i.

¹⁵ J. M. Roberts, *The Hutchinson History of the World* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), p. 710.

¹⁶ Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 487.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’, in Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 54.

¹⁸ Roger Osborne, *Civilisation: A New History of the Western World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), p. 304.

¹⁹ Roberts, *History of the World*, p. 710.

process of systematic doubt so lucidly propounded by Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* of 1637.²⁰

At the heart of this movement was the optimistic belief in limitless progress²¹ through rational processes, the accumulation of knowledge – epistemology was a central concern of such great Enlightenment minds as John Locke and David Hume²² – and the assumption that the ‘rules’ of the physical, human, and social worlds could be uncovered through the application of scientific observation and methodological enquiry. Even in the arts, beauty became synonymous with neo-classical rules and principles. Indeed, in all disciplines from history to politics, an enthusiasm to understand everything and reveal universal truths – typified by the fervent work of the Encyclopedists – permeated the European intellectual environment. ‘Dare to know [*Sapere aude!*],’²³ implored Kant and, as Diderot exclaimed in his preface to the *Encyclopédie*, ‘Everything must be shaken up, without exception and without circumspection.’²⁴ Importantly, as Gat states, ‘All spheres of human culture and all natural phenomena were to be subjugated to intellectual domination, *and war was no exception.*’²⁵

The military thinkers of the Enlightenment strove to produce definitive works that would regulate the conduct of military affairs and, as Clausewitz observed, ‘Efforts were therefore made to equip the conduct of war with principles, rules, and even systems.’²⁶ In the late seventeenth century, Raimondo Montecuccoli was perhaps the true progenitor of the system builders, having ‘searched for a universal paradigm, an integration of all knowledge, scientific, military, and political, derived from experience.’²⁷ In his *Dell arte militare* he stated that, ‘I have done my utmost to discover basic rules on which every

²⁰ Rene Descartes, *Discourses on Method and the Meditations*, (London: Penguin, 1968).

²¹ Gibbon could state in 1780 that ‘we cannot determine to what height the human species may aspire in their advances towards perfection; but it may be safely presumed that no people...will relapse into their original barbarism.’ Quoted in Wells, *Outline of History*, p. 449.

²² For example: John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) and David Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739).

²³ Christopher Clark, *The Iron Kingdom: The Rise and Fall of Prussia 1600-1945* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 247.

²⁴ Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory*, p. 487.

²⁵ Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 30. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 154.

²⁷ Gunther E. Rothenberg, ‘Maurice of Nassau, Gustavus Adolphus, Raimondo Montecuccoli, and the ‘Military Revolution’ of the Seventeenth Century’, in Paret, *Makers*, p. 56.

science is based...and, having considered the entire range of world history, I dare say that I have not found a single notable military exploit which would not fit in with these rules.’²⁸ Yet five later thinkers stand out as true exemplars of the military-scientific tradition, all of whom we know Clausewitz was familiar with:²⁹ Saxe, Lloyd, Guibert, Bülow, and Jomini.

Maurice de Saxe opened his 1732 *Reveries de L’Art de la Guerre* with what amounted to a self-challenge: ‘All sciences have principles and rules. War has none.’³⁰ He believed that war, ‘like nature whose secrets had just been laid bare by Newton, operates in accordance with fixed regularities’,³¹ but that those regularities were, in his time, ‘replete with shadows in whose obscurity one cannot move with an assured step.’³² His work purported to unveil those regularities in the form of principles which, if followed, would lead to victory. However, his analysis was confined largely to the immediate tactical concerns of the period. The French officer, *littérateur*, and *philosophe* Jacques Antoine Hippolyte, Comte de Guibert, published his highly influential *Essai tactique générale* in 1772 which aimed to be a grand system of war covering the whole subject.³³ Gat notes that Guibert ‘appeared to have incorporated into his military treatise as many ideas of the Enlightenment as possible.’³⁴ In his *Essai* he argued that most of the principles formerly developed were rendered obsolete by changed circumstances – the task of his work – his ‘science of all times’³⁵ – was to apply scientific methodology to tactics in a way that, like mathematical truths, people from opposite ends of the world would have to agree on the principles so formulated.³⁶ Another prominent author, Henry Lloyd, in his ‘Reflections on the General Principles of War’ of 1781 stated that ‘this art, like all others, is founded

²⁸ Raimondo Montecuccoli quoted in Rothenberg, ‘Seventeenth Century’, p. 63.

²⁹ See Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 174.

³⁰ Maurice de Saxe, *Reveries on the Art of War*, trans. and ed. Thomas R. Phillips (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), p. 17.

³¹ Martin van Creveld, ‘The Eternal Clausewitz’, in Michael I. Handel (ed.), *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 40.

³² Saxe, *Reveries*, p. 17.

³³ R. R. Palmer, ‘Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bülow: From Dynastic to National War’, in Paret, *Makers*, p. 106. Martin van Creveld, *The Art of War: War and Military Thought* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2005), p. 91.

³⁴ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 46.

³⁵ Guibert quoted in Palmer, ‘From Dynastic to National War’, p. 107.

³⁶ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 49.

on certain and fixed principles, which are by their nature invariable.’³⁷ He believed mathematical principles could be applied to fortification, artillery, marching, and battle formations.³⁸

Adam Heinrich Dietrich von Bülow’s *Spirit of the Modern System of War* published in 1799 was based on geometrical and mathematical principles concerning an army’s relation to its base, its objective, and the ‘lines of operations’ connecting them³⁹ – the latter being a term borrowed from Lloyd.⁴⁰ As Crevelld notes, his work resembles ‘nothing so much as a textbook in Euclidean geometry...the entire art of strategy was reduced to a single, simple, geometrical formula’⁴¹ and Howard has described it as ‘rococo absurdity.’⁴² Clausewitz derided Bülow’s ‘geometrical system, to which – as all charlatans are wont to do – he ultimately gave a veneer of mathematical elegance.’⁴³

Jomini, most notably in his book *The Art of War*, published in 1836, was also concerned with discovering a system for the art of war, which, like Bülow, relied heavily on concepts – some original, most borrowed⁴⁴ – such as ‘base’ and ‘lines of operations’ although his analysis did extend to political considerations too. In particular, Jomini drew attention to the importance of operating on so-called ‘interior lines’ in the ‘zone of operations.’⁴⁵ Also, in contradistinction to earlier thinkers such as Saxe, Jomini was to insist that tactical matters were subject to considerable flux, whilst ‘strategy, particularly, may indeed be

³⁷ Henry Lloyd, in *History of the Late War between the King of Prussia and the Empress of Germany and her Allies* (London: 1781), p. vi.

³⁸ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 72.

³⁹ Palmer, ‘From Dynastic to National War’, p. 115.

⁴⁰ Lloyd had introduced the concept in his 1781 ‘Reflections on the Principles of the Art of War.’ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 77.

⁴¹ Crevelld, *The Art of War*, p. 97.

⁴² Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), p. 25.

⁴³ Carl von Clausewitz, ‘On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 103. In Book 5 of *On War*, he states that ‘it is evident that this elegant piece of geometry is nothing but a toy: it rests on a series of substitutions at the expense of truth.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 409.

⁴⁴ Jomini was heavily indebted to Lloyd for many of his terms. Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 44.

⁴⁵ Jomini describes interior lines as ‘those adopted by one or two armies to oppose several hostile bodies, and having such a direction that the general can concentrate the masses and maneuver with his whole force in a shorter period of time than it would require for the enemy to oppose to them a greater force.’ See Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Texas: El Paso Norte Press, 2005), pp. 79-100. Clausewitz is fairly dismissive of the concept given its ‘purely geometrical character’ despite it being based on an expectation of engagement as opposed to other battle evading principles. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 156. He nevertheless agrees that interior lines ‘can multiply strength to the point where the attacker dare not expose himself unless he is greatly superior’ and thus can be of great, almost decisive benefit to the defence, and particularly at the strategic and operational levels, pp. 441-42.

regulated by fixed laws resembling those of the positive sciences.’⁴⁶ Rather, Jomini sought his principles of war by ‘abstracting it from its political and social context...turning warfare into a huge game of chess.’⁴⁷ In many respects Jomini represented the culmination of the scientific, formalistic, and schematic approach, and Howard has neatly explained why this was so: ‘The study of the campaigns of Frederick the Great and of the young Bonaparte had revealed to him, he believed, precisely those fundamental Newtonian principles of strategy for which eighteenth century theorists had sought in vain.’⁴⁸ John Shy has observed that Jomini was almost evangelical in his insistence on the ‘timeless verities’ that his science of war would provide.⁴⁹

It would be unfair to claim that this was all these theorists contributed to the study of war or that Clausewitz was simply reacting against, rather than building upon their ideas.⁵⁰ Their works are more complex and nuanced than adumbrated above and we should avoid subscribing to a ‘vague and stereotyped image of Clausewitz’s predecessors.’⁵¹ For instance, Jomini was aware that there was more to war than his formalistic concepts conveyed. He even admitted that ‘everything that can be termed the poetry and metaphysics of war will have a permanent influence on its results’ and that ‘theories cannot teach men with mathematical precision what they should do in every possible case.’⁵² His comment in the ‘Second Appendix’ of *The Art of War*, however, is revealing of his general approach. He states that ‘war, far from being an exact science, is a terrible and impassioned drama, regulated, it is true by three or four general principles, but also dependent for its results upon a number of moral and physical complications.’⁵³ Judging by the language of this remark, there is strong reason to believe that Jomini is reluctant to acknowledge the importance of the moral

⁴⁶ Jomini, *Art of War*, p. 258. This point is also noted by Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 115.

⁴⁷ Shy, ‘Jomini’, p. 144.

⁴⁸ Howard, *Studies*, p. 29.

⁴⁹ Shy, ‘Jomini’, p. 145.

⁵⁰ Strachan has noted that Clausewitz was ‘not so different from his predecessors as he liked to maintain: he developed their themes as much as he reacted against them.’ Hew Strachan, ‘Review of Azar Gat’s *The Origins of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to Clausewitz*’, *English Historical Review*, Vol. 107, No. 425 (October, 1992), p. 1035. The purpose of this section has been to reveal the essential difference in their overall approach to the subject of war – in this sense, the contrast is pronounced.

⁵¹ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 95.

⁵² Jomini, *Art of War*, pp. 258 and 260.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 286. Bond notes that ‘Jomini acknowledged that the conduct of war could be significantly affected by the passions and morale of the antagonists, while chance or superior leadership could prevail in battle over strict adherence to the rules.’ Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 48.

dimension. The implication is that, with regard to those ‘three or four principles’, as Sun Tzu put it, ‘Those who know them prevail, those who do not know them do not prevail.’⁵⁴ In the hands of competent generals with good troops they constitute ‘means of almost certain success.’⁵⁵ Jomini may have developed principles that were sometimes valid, but they ‘did not come from a comprehensive view of war that integrated historical fact with contemporary reality.’⁵⁶

So, the essential or overarching feature of these theories, whatever qualifications may be advanced, was their emphasis on uncovering scientific, quantifiable, or universal principles of war. Their recognition of other, less tangible factors did not greatly alter the regular operation of the principles they had purportedly discovered; moral, psychological, or political factors were not truly integrated in their theories, but rather presented almost as addendums, afterthoughts, secondary concerns, or separate, even awkward dimensions of war that theory might ultimately ignore. Clausewitz rejected such ‘fanciful’, ‘one-sided’, and ‘pretentious’ theories, accusing them of ‘sham brilliance and sterile pedantry.’⁵⁷ Furthermore, those ‘narrow systems’ were accompanied by a ‘lawless rabble of camp followers’ in the form of ‘*jargon, technicalities, and metaphors*’:⁵⁸ an observation only too relevant to much contemporary military writing. Their weakness, according to Clausewitz, was a consequence not only of their search for unrealisable scientific principles, but also the inevitable *selectivity* such approaches encouraged: their objective could only be attained by arbitrarily restricting their inquiries to those phenomena that would yield to precise formulae⁵⁹ – or what T. E. Lawrence would later term war’s ‘algebraical elements.’⁶⁰ Clausewitz, by contrast, whilst certainly recognising the ‘mathematical’ elements of strategy,⁶¹ emphasised the importance of

⁵⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. T. Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), p. 45.

⁵⁵ Jomini, *Summary*, p. 260.

⁵⁶ Peter Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 203. Bond notes how he even avoided historical events that ‘seemed to controvert his principles.’ Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 48.

⁵⁷ Clausewitz, ‘On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst’, pp. 103-04.

⁵⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 197. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁹ A point made by Alan Beyerchen in his article, ‘Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War’, *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Winter, 1992, pp. 59-90.

⁶⁰ T. E. Lawrence, ‘The Evolution of a Revolt’, *Army Quarterly and Defence Journal*, October, 1920.

⁶¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 215.

understanding the whole and all the ‘endless complexities involved.’⁶² Finally, of course, Clausewitz recognised that their systems were beset by one fundamental failing, as Brian Bond tautly remarks: ‘if strategy was a science whose principles could be learnt what was to prevent all the belligerents learning them?’⁶³

Yet, as John Keegan states, Clausewitz has to be seen as ‘a child of the Enlightenment’⁶⁴ in the sense that he grew up in a Europe still heavily influenced by the spirit of reason and the attainment of knowledge, despite the fact that the hegemony of the Enlightenment message had passed its zenith by the latter half of the eighteenth century. Natural disasters such as the Lisbon earthquake of 1755,⁶⁵ destructive conflict such as the Seven Years War (1756-63), and the growing popularity of new thinking – such as that associated with Rousseau and, later, Kant – had begun to chip away at the foundations of unbounded optimistic thinking. Additionally, to many conservative observers, the horrors and excesses unleashed by the French Revolution had tarnished the image of those supposedly acting in the name of reason – for instance, Edmund Burke is famous for his vehement attack on the ‘college of armed fanatics’⁶⁶ who created a government which was ‘such a complete breach with the manners and sympathies of Europe as to present a serious and palpable threat.’⁶⁷ Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that these developments meant the Enlightenment ‘project’ had been significantly extenuated or lost a great deal of its cultural dominance by the time Clausewitz began to develop his ideas. It must also be remembered that Germany experienced its own unique version of the European Enlightenment: the *Aufklärung*.⁶⁸ As Tim Blanning notes, ‘It is difficult to comprehend how anyone familiar with the *Aufklärung* can think that it was part of a single Enlightenment.’⁶⁹ The German Enlightenment was altogether more realistic, serious, and profound. It was also less radical, whilst still being preoccupied

⁶² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 154.

⁶³ Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 47.

⁶⁴ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 12.

⁶⁵ Referred to in Voltaire’s satirical masterpiece, *Candide* (London: Penguin, 1947), p. 36.

⁶⁶ Burke quoted in David Boucher, *Political Theories of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 322.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 322. This was because not only did the spread of seditious ideas threaten the internal cohesion of neighbouring states, but also the delicate European balance of power.

⁶⁸ Some of the key figures of the German *Aufklärung* were Christian Wolff, Gottfried Leibnitz, Moses Mendelsohn, Gotthold Lessing, and Immanuel Kant.

⁶⁹ Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 499.

with shining the light of reason on all manner of phenomena. Importantly, it was not essential to subscribe to the fullest excesses of the French Enlightenment to be affected by the spirit of reason.

Only a thinker influenced by the paradigmatic spirit of Enlightenment inquiry would feel compelled to write of his work that ‘its scientific character consists in an attempt to investigate the essence of the phenomena of war...No logical conclusion has been avoided.’⁷⁰ Strachan notes that ‘*On War* belongs in the tradition of the Enlightenment, and is indeed the culmination of its influence on military thought. Clausewitz tells us – through Marie – that it was a result of his exposure to the work of the *philosophes* that he began the process of intellectual and spiritual awakening in the second half of the 1790s.’⁷¹ Also, as Howard notes, Clausewitz was too experienced and wise to underrate or entirely avoid the rich vein of thought that emerged from the ‘classical’ school of military theorists.⁷² It is perhaps at least understandable that one commentator writing in 1835, with respect to Clausewitz’s historical study of the war of 1799, could compare him to ‘a professor who leads his students across the bridge to mathematical wisdom by demonstrating the Pythagorean theorem for the twentieth time.’⁷³ As Paret notes, this was, however, a misreading of Clausewitz, foreshadowing over a century and half of misinterpretations.⁷⁴

Equally, Clausewitz did not subscribe to (yet had some sympathy for) the views of the so-called ‘antinomians’, led by the arch-sceptic Berenhorst, who held that formal theory was inapplicable to war, which is in fact determined only by the contingent, exceptional, and unpredictable.⁷⁵ Rejecting such intellectual defeatism, Clausewitz was undoubtedly prone to detached, abstract speculation at times⁷⁶ and was motivated by an ‘intense search for ‘scientifically valid’ methods of analysing and interpreting the reality of war.’⁷⁷ This was particularly evident in his early work, such as his article criticising Bülow, published in the *Neue*

⁷⁰ Clausewitz, ‘Author’s Preface To an Unpublished Manuscript on the Theory of War, Written between 1816 and 1818’, in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 69.

⁷¹ Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz’s On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), p. 89.

⁷² Howard, *Studies*, pp. 26-27.

⁷³ Quoted in Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 339.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁷⁵ Howard, *Clausewitz*, p. 23.

⁷⁶ Raymond Aron, *Peace and War* (New Jersey: Transaction, 2003), p. 43.

⁷⁷ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 148.

Bellona in 1805, in which he states that, ‘We shall apply ourselves to general notions...because in the constitution of a science it is to them that we shall above all return.’⁷⁸ Strachan captures this aspect of Clausewitz’s approach when he notes that ‘he had read the works of the Enlightenment, and, for all his damning comments about certain military theorists, he was determined to develop a theory of his own.’⁷⁹

However, the intellectual providence of Clausewitz’s thought does not end here. In order to fully grasp what Clausewitz was attempting to achieve in his lifetime, we should perhaps view him as the illegitimate heir of a tradition of military thought stemming from the French Enlightenment, via the German *Aufklärers* of the 1770s and 1780s,⁸⁰ and through to his contemporaries, including prominent figures such as Jomini and his influential mentor, Scharnhorst.⁸¹ This was a lineage united by the search for a general theory of war but divided by their contrasting and individualistic approaches. As Clausewitz himself frequently reminds us, he was reacting against what he believed to be the mistaken views of excessively rationalist theorists, yet importantly, and in a more positive sense, they certainly provided him with a guiding vision of intellectual clarity, systematic analysis, rigorous method, and objective inquiry, without which *On War* may never have been conceived.

Here we must cease discussion of Clausewitz’s indebtedness to the Enlightenment lest we overstate the association. Following earlier Enlightenment thinkers, Clausewitz certainly developed a ‘system’, but it was more a ‘system of notions and propositions which are linked and which translates into ideas the structure of the object.’⁸² Clausewitz owed more to a tradition that represented, in many respects, its very antithesis. As Paret notes, he ‘rejected the popular Enlightenment, with its doctrinaire faith in rationality and progress, and

⁷⁸ Quoted in Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 43.

⁷⁹ Hew Strachan, ‘Clausewitz and the Dialectics of War’, in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 19.

⁸⁰ See Gat, *Military Thought*, pp. 56-96.

⁸¹ Azar Gat has demonstrated that Scharnhorst should be situated in the context of the German *Aufklärers*, despite his rejection of the radical interpretations of the movement. His early publications such as his *The Handbook for Officers on the Applied Parts of the Sciences of War* reveal his debt to Enlightenment thought. Gat, *Military Thought*, pp. 159-61.

⁸² Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, trans. C. Booker and N. Stone (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 55. Roger Parkinson quotes Clausewitz: ‘System in this treatise is not to be found on the surface, and instead of a finished building of theory there are only the materials.’ *Clausewitz: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), p. 310.

found no difficulty in acknowledging limits to human understanding.’⁸³ To reduce war to a list of rules was mistaken: ‘the variety and constant change in war could never be fully caught by a system.’⁸⁴ For Strachan, it was perhaps less the influence of any ‘new thinking’ or original cultural movement, but rather Clausewitz’s own experiences of war and his growing familiarity with military history that constituted the ‘reality checks on [his] inclination to abstraction.’⁸⁵

An alternative worldview: the German Movement

Whilst Strachan is no doubt correct, we should equally emphasise the extent to which the relative uniformity and predictability of Enlightenment military thought, typified by men such as Bülow and Guibert, was beginning to be assailed in the intellectual sphere by men such as Berenhorst and Scharnhorst, thus opening Clausewitz’s mind to original methods of studying war, whilst the pervasive cultural forces of the ‘German Movement’ were revealing a whole new perspective on reality to him. Furthermore, at the time German society was experiencing a profound, if underlying, rupturing of established patterns as the prevailing *ancien régime* order was assailed by various competing socio-cultural forces. Clausewitz’s work somewhat reflects this tension apparent in the wider social fabric of early nineteenth century Germany.

In military terms, as briefly noted above, Berenhorst was an important counterweight to the rationalist cultural hegemony and his contrarian approach would have impressed an open and searching mind such as Clausewitz’s. Berenhorst, in his *Reflections on the Art of War*, published between 1796 and 1799, argued there could be no fixed, scientific principles in war and instead everything was dependent on the operation of individual genius that could be neither imitated nor analysed⁸⁶ – he ‘condemned all dogma.’⁸⁷ The search for immutable laws was wrong-headed in his opinion: ‘What is the use of rules when one is covered up to one’s ears with exceptions?’⁸⁸ War was suffused with the unknown, the unpredictable, and the incalculable that no theory could adequately

⁸³ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 149.

⁸⁴ Peter Paret, ‘The Genesis of *On War*’, in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 6.

⁸⁵ Strachan, ‘Dialectics’, p. 19.

⁸⁶ Howard, *Clausewitz*, p. 23.

⁸⁷ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 202.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 156.

capture. Blind chance, the spirit of an army, the moral factors that animate the troops: these ‘unknown and uncontrollable modifications of the human spirit’⁸⁹ were the true elements of war. In military terms, Berenhorst was the embodiment of the Counter-Enlightenment with its ‘excessive irrationalism’⁹⁰ – indeed, his other writings included critiques of plays by the dramatists of the ‘Storm and Stress’ movement.⁹¹ We will consider other aspects of Berenhorst’s thinking in relation to chance and uncertainty in Chapter 5, but for now it is sufficient to emphasise his radically sceptical approach to theory. As Creveld suggests, if Jomini and Berenhorst typify, respectively, the extremes of rationality and irrationality in war then it was left to Clausewitz to reconcile these opposing strands of thought.⁹²

The influence of Scharnhorst is also vital in this respect, for at a crucial time in the development of Clausewitz’s thought, whilst he was studying at the Berlin Academy for Young Officers and as a member of the select *Militärische Gesellschaft*, Scharnhorst was beginning to rail against the one-sided theories of the ‘systems’ that had emerged at around the turn of the century. Scharnhorst – his great friend and mentor – presented Clausewitz with the possibility of a theoretical middle-ground whereby the art of war has two sides: ‘one is mechanical and susceptible to theoretical study, the other circumstantial and dominated by creative genius and experience.’⁹³ Clausewitz would take this precedent introduced by Scharnhorst and develop it so that it would be less of a dichotomy and more of an integrated duality.

Thus, we can begin to understand that Clausewitz’s approach reflected the scientific Enlightenment standard principally in terms of his foundational methodology and the desire for understanding the phenomena of war and its universal aspects. However, within this broad conception, his theory consistently expresses the limits of theory and the reach of rules or law-like propositions in the realm of war (in many ways reflecting, and possibly influenced second-hand by the manner in which Kant had revealed the limits of human reason). Thus, throughout his work we come across somewhat paradoxical features: for

⁸⁹ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 155.

⁹⁰ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 112.

⁹¹ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 154.

⁹² Creveld, *The Art of War*, p. 107.

⁹³ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 167.

instance, it was his scientific approach which led him to the concrete proposition that the ‘uncertain’ in war must be recognised as central to theory. Clausewitz believed it was dangerous to generalise from ideas that have only limited validity⁹⁴ as many of the classical theorists had done and this methodological assertion forms the basis of a central theme that runs through Clausewitz’s work: the search for an appropriate balance between the universal and the particular. Vital to the resolution of such issues would be a robust understanding of history, both in terms of its substance and its deeper philosophical meaning.

Rediscovering history

In broad terms, history and historical perspective had been somewhat lacking in Enlightenment thought with its strong bias towards the future, typified by the belief in progress and the boundless potential for perfectibility based upon the discovery and implementation of rational principles. The past was viewed as the backward place we had come from, the future the ‘sunlit uplands’ we were heading towards. Indeed, as a number of commentators have held, various strains of social utopianism stem from such rationalist, a-historical thinking.⁹⁵ With regard to war, such thinking might manifest itself in the belief that it can be perfectly understood, controlled, limited, or, indeed, eliminated from human social relations.⁹⁶ The potential consequences of such thinking is superbly described by the political scientist Jeane Kirkpatrick, who notes that, ‘Rationalist theories are speculative rather than empirical and historical; rationalist reforms seek to conform human behaviour to oversimplified, unrealistic models.’⁹⁷

The utopianism Kirkpatrick recognised in politics, has been just as prevalent in the realm of military theory. This occurs because, as Kirkpatrick explains, ‘Thought set free from experience is unlimited by the constraints of experience or of probability. If history is not relevant, then the future is free

⁹⁴ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 149.

⁹⁵ See John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2007).

⁹⁶ As Michael Howard explains, ‘It was commonly accepted by the *philosophes* that men were naturally good but had been corrupted by institutions; and once those institutions had been reformed, natural virtue would reassert itself and mankind would live at peace.’ Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War* (London: Profile Books, 2001), p. 30.

⁹⁷ Jeane Kirkpatrick, *Democracy and Double Standards: Rationalism and Reason in Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 11.

from the past. Therefore, theories cut loose from experience are usually blindly optimistic.’⁹⁸ These passages are worth quoting at length because this is exactly the kind of thinking that Clausewitz rejected and was reacting against: the excesses generated by Enlightenment thought, which had been revealed to him practically, in terms of the murderous consequences of the French Revolution and theoretically, in the one-sided and limited theories of the rationalist ‘systems’ theorists who conveniently banished friction, uncertainty, political conditions, and emotions from their work, thus perverting their outcomes.⁹⁹

The German Movement that emerged in the late nineteenth century signified a dramatic shift away from such a-historical perspectives and ‘moralising assumptions’¹⁰⁰ that had typified rationalistic Enlightenment thinking. This shift was strongly evident in its leading proponents’ fascination with Homer, folk-tales, and Celtic myth.¹⁰¹ This attitude towards the past was indeed symptomatic of the period –and found its greatest expression in the work of Johann Gottfried von Herder.

Herder was a dominant figure in the development of the conception of history known as historicism. The essential premise of this outlook was its emphasis on the particularity and uniqueness of historical cultures and societies, which could only be truly understood in their own right through empathetic analysis of their peculiar characteristics. This individualising view of the past stood in stark contrast with the prevailing Enlightenment conception, with its predominantly determinist belief in progress and the universalising, almost retrospectively patronising projection of its own values back through history or across different cultures. Herder believed that the ‘*Volksgeist*’¹⁰² or ‘material culture of a people’s life, their skills, language and beliefs and artistic and literary practices, make up a single self-sufficient and characteristic whole.’¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Kirkpatrick, *Democracy and Double Standards*, p. 10.

⁹⁹ Similarly, in the history of military thought, often theories that believed war could be limited by adherence to a particular system appear to be generally rooted in times when war was limited due to objective historical conditions or following a period of destructive war when thinkers attempted to formulate ways that would limit its conduct in the future. See Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Kings Lynn: Routledge, 2006), pp. 3-4.

¹⁰⁰ Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 138.

¹⁰¹ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 148.

¹⁰² Marvin Perry, *An Intellectual History of Modern Europe* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1993), p. 234.

¹⁰³ Nicholas Boyle, *German Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 48.

Herder's concern with the importance of comprehending historical conditions was directly imparted to Clausewitz through Scharnhorst,¹⁰⁴ given a more theological application in the influential theological scholarship of Friedrich Schleiermacher (a personal acquaintance of Clausewitz), and is strongly apparent in the methodology of *On War*.

Arguably the 'greatest influence on the development of Clausewitz's historical and theoretical thought,'¹⁰⁵ Scharnhorst had emphasised that history was at the centre of the study of war.¹⁰⁶ As Clausewitz notes in his, 'On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst' of 1818 – written as a form of obituary following the latter's death in 1813 – he had a 'great preference and respect for the power of historic evidence in all matters that preoccupied him.'¹⁰⁷ Although the style of their historical work differed in both style and content, the example of Scharnhorst is clearly apparent in Clausewitz's pragmatic, objective, and non-partisan approach to historical study.¹⁰⁸ Essentially, Scharnhorst taught Clausewitz that the only evidence we have about war is historical: in *On War* he notes that, 'Undoubtedly, the knowledge which is basic to war is empirical...revealed to us only by experience.'¹⁰⁹

As Paret notes, Clausewitz had a clear 'sense of the particularity of individuals and societies, which observed their own laws rather than rationalist abstractions.'¹¹⁰ Whilst he held that human feelings might have a universal nature, 'their human, social, and intellectual expression was in flux.'¹¹¹ *On War* is scattered with historical references, short analyses, and methodological enquiries into the proper use of history. However, the extent of his historicism is most impressively revealed in his captivating sociological survey of war from the 'semibarbarous Tartars' through to the nineteenth century in Chapter 3B, Book 8. He concludes that chapter by stating that 'we wanted to show how every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar

¹⁰⁴ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 217.

¹⁰⁵ Paret in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 85. Clausewitz describes Scharnhorst's manual as 'the best that has ever been written about actual war.' Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁰⁶ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 71.

¹⁰⁷ Clausewitz, 'On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst', p. 100.

¹⁰⁸ Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁹ This insight is associated with Scharnhorst's teaching whom, he states 'considers historical examples to be of prime importance to the subject, and makes admirable use of them.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 199.

¹¹⁰ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 166.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 167.

preconceptions...it follows then that the events of every age must be judged in the light of its own peculiarities.’¹¹² As Gat rightly points out, it was Clausewitz’s acute sensitivity to the diversity of historical experience that represented the greatest challenge to his search for a universal theory, whilst also, somewhat paradoxically, facilitating it, as we will see. History was also crucial to Clausewitz’s stress on the importance of context in his theoretical framework – this subject will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Explorations

These considerations into the dominant influences on Clausewitz’s approach to his subject provide the basis for a more detailed examination of the manner in which Clausewitz arrived at the trinity, and the theoretical and methodological philosophy that underpins it. What is particularly fascinating about the theoretical foundation of Clausewitz’s work, is the way in which it may be viewed as a synthesis of the various strands of thought that had developed in the decades prior to Clausewitz’s time. His theoretical work was derivative, but his originality lay in the manner in which he combined separate analytic strands and applied their integrated force to the issues surrounding war.¹¹³ We might visualise Clausewitz as being tied to a number of ropes all pulling him in various directions and, whilst at times he seemed to be pulled one way or the other, ultimately he managed to keep his balance, control those various influences, and utilise their most positive aspects towards his own ultimate purpose. This was no easy task. At many points the temptation to be drawn towards a particular method or viewpoint was strong, and this tension can be sensed in his writing.

The following sections consider some of the central themes that emerge in Clausewitz’s methodology. First, Clausewitz’s general conception of theory is outlined as well as the most important methodological tools he employed. Subsequently, a set of five prominent methodological pairs are presented as platforms for examining the prominent aspects of Clausewitz’s approach to his subject: art and science; dogmatism versus pedagogy; theory and reality; material and moral factors; and the universal and particular. There is of course significant

¹¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 717.

¹¹³ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 150.

overlap between these pairs, as many of the ideas are dependent on, support, or feed into one another, however this structure provides a useful route into the issues that preoccupied Clausewitz in this regard and forms a firm basis for our comprehension of the more substantive aspects of the trinity.

Concepts and method

Scharnhorst had imparted to Clausewitz the importance of military theory: 'through conceptualisation, military theory makes possible the intellectual treatment of the factors active in war.'¹¹⁴ This sentiment is clearly reflected in Clausewitz's work. As he states, 'this subject, like any other that does not surpass man's intellectual capacity, can be elucidated by an inquiring mind, and its internal structure can to some degree be revealed. That alone is enough to turn the concept of theory into reality.'¹¹⁵ Despite his disdain for the 'systems' of Enlightenment military thinkers, Clausewitz would not follow Berenhorst in his theoretical antinomianism: war was susceptible to theoretical analysis. The fundamental task of the theorist was to 'eliminate the weeds that spring from ignorance' by shining the light of theory on all phenomena.¹¹⁶ Scharnhorst had also emphasised, following Montesquieu, that, 'Correct concepts had to be grounded in 'the nature of things or in experience.'¹¹⁷ This belief is strongly evident in Clausewitz's work.

According to Clausewitz, the task of theory was to clarify reality, or more accurately to help men clarify it by stimulating their minds: 'Theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyse the constituent elements of war, to distinguish precisely what at first sight seems confused.'¹¹⁸ He also remarked that the 'human mind...has a universal thirst for clarity, and longs to feel itself part of an orderly scheme of things.'¹¹⁹ Whilst rejecting the idea that war itself could be treated as a science, importantly, this did not mean it could not be *approached* in the spirit of scientific inquiry, only that one could not expect law-like principles to emerge as a result:

¹¹⁴ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 162.

¹¹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 174.

¹¹⁶ Hugh Smith, *On Clausewitz* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 176.

¹¹⁷ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 162.

¹¹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 163.

¹¹⁹ Clausewitz, 'Unfinished Note', in *On War*, p. 80.

Anyone for whom this is all meaningless either will admit no theoretical analysis at all, or his intelligence has never been insulted by the confused and confusing welter of ideas that one so often hears and reads on the subject of the conduct of war. These have no fixed point of view; they lead to no satisfactory conclusion; they appear sometimes banal, sometimes absurd, sometimes simply adrift in a sea of vague generalisation; and all because this subject has seldom been examined in a spirit of scientific investigation.¹²⁰

Clausewitz is perhaps unfair here: earlier thinkers, such as Montecuccoli, had at least attempted to examine the subject in the spirit of scientific investigation. It appears that what Clausewitz is actually proposing is simply more of a systematic and clear-headed approach, conducted in the spirit of scientific rigour, that would serve to 'clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled.'¹²¹

An essential element, even precondition of reliable theory involves an attempt to recognise the defining character of phenomena: he states that, 'Not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining the question clearly and simply.'¹²² His theory would seek to develop an understanding of war through a detailed exploration and understanding of its constituent elements, so *On War* begins: 'I propose to consider first the various elements of the subject, next its various parts or sections, and finally the whole in its internal structure.'¹²³ In this sense, the trinity, as Clausewitz explains, enables us to make a 'differentiation and identification' of the 'major components' of the structure of theory.¹²⁴

How was he to achieve this goal? It is useful to consider the principal methodological tools Clausewitz employed in order to resolve the philosophical,

¹²⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 152.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 152. Although not to quite the same extent, in some ways Clausewitz's use of the term scientific is similar to that adopted by Fuller in his *The Foundations of the Science of War* in which he states that 'science is nothing else than true knowledge in place of haphazard knowledge, logical thinking in place of chaotic thinking, and, ultimately, truth itself in place of falsehood.' Fuller, *Foundations*. Available online at: <<http://cgsc.leavenworth.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/fuller2/fuller2.asp>>, retrieved 3 August 2008.

¹²² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 152.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 83. The Penguin edition has: 'We propose to consider first the single elements of our subject, then each branch or part, and, last of all, the whole, in all its relations.' Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham, and ed. F. N. Maude (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 101.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 101.

epistemological, and theoretical problems he faced. This subject has generated a great deal of debate: was Clausewitz Kantian, Hegelian, or even as argued by one commentator, Newtonian¹²⁵ in his approach? It is important to note that a definitive answer on this issue is probably unrealisable, primarily because it appears Clausewitz himself did not subscribe to *any one* particular method and never absolutely or in the precise way intended by its originator. What is not in doubt, however, is that certain central methodological tools are apparent and the evidence of the influence of particular philosophers or traditions is strong: foremost amongst these is the method of the dialectic.

The use of the dialectical method was a strong feature of German Idealist philosophy of the time, and most strongly associated with Hegel and appropriated by Fichte. Since the time of Socrates the dialectic has been a powerful means of exploring any given subject and it enabled Clausewitz to arrive at some of his most important conclusions. It appears to have been a method that Clausewitz only seriously appropriated later in his life as he attempted to deal with issues that involved apparent contradictions and tensions in their relationship to one another.¹²⁶ But, in an important sense, war itself for Clausewitz is an embodiment of dialectic processes, a competition between opposites which resolves itself into a new unity, peace, which itself constitutes the thesis against which new antithetical forces react.

Where Clausewitz employs dialectical arguments to draw out ideas, the aim was to 'achieve understanding through debate, through point and counterpoint; the dialogue is continuous.'¹²⁷ Through this line of reasoning, a thesis and its antithesis leads to a logical contradiction and must therefore be resolved in some form of theoretical reconciliation. The dialectical influence on his approach – although not of a strictly Hegelian form¹²⁸ – is clearly revealed in

¹²⁵ See Crevelde, 'The Eternal Clausewitz', pp. 35-48.

¹²⁶ Gat notes that in his work, prior to the last stage of his life, there 'are no theses and antitheses, no polarity or dialectic, not, indeed, any mention of 'absolute war.' Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 233.

¹²⁷ Strachan, 'Dialectics', p. 37.

¹²⁸ It is important to note the limits of Clausewitz's adoption, or even understanding, of the Hegelian dialectic – which was far more complex than presented here – and, again, to stress that Clausewitz used them in an instrumental fashion, drawing upon their insights but by no means adhering strictly to their method. Both Aron and Paret express reservations regarding the extent of Hegel's influence on Clausewitz. Gat is more accepting of Hegel's influence, but again concedes that Hegel's impact is derivative rather than direct. See Gat, *Military Thought*, pp. 232-36.

Book 8 when Clausewitz states that, 'Up to now we have considered the incompatibility between war and every other human interest...that no philosophy can resolve. Now we must seek out the unity into which these contradictory elements combine in real life, which they do by partly neutralising one another.'¹²⁹

Paret has argued that the failure to understand the nature of Clausewitz's method leads to considerable misunderstanding of his theories: 'The often tragic history of the misinterpretation of his works derives largely from the inability of his readers to proceed beyond his thesis to its antithesis and to understand that he usually locates the truth in the tension between the two...In Clausewitz's work...polarity is a central concept.'¹³⁰ A similar point is made by Strachan who notes that 'Hegel was interested in the relations between the abstract and the concrete, and used dialectics to explore them, even if in Hegel's case the poles in the argument excluded each other, whereas in Clausewitz's case they tend to depend on each other.'¹³¹ Aron believed the dialectic is crucial to understanding Clausewitz's thought: he identified three central dialectical pairs which Clausewitz grapples with in his work: means and ends, moral and physical, defence and attack. The trinity might be considered as the only point where Clausewitz presents the most complete synthesis arising out his dialectical analysis. There is, however, no Hegelian progression to an 'Absolute Idea' (this should not be confused with Clausewitz's 'absolute war', which is simply a logical abstraction – in fact, the 'thesis' in a dialectical argument – which he used to powerfully convey the contrast with war in reality) and as Bassford notes, the text is 'largely unmarked by clear dialectical sign posts, labelled thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.'¹³²

So, the trinity represents the culmination of a philosophical exploration of war which explains the phenomenon by breaking it down into observable and definable concepts; a process that is vital 'if theory is to serve its principal purpose of discriminating between dissimilar elements.'¹³³ In order to explain

¹²⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 732.

¹³⁰ Paret, *Understanding War*, pp. 163-64.

¹³¹ Strachan, *Biography*, p. 91.

¹³² Christopher Bassford, 'The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought', in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 75.

¹³³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 147.

and determine the operation of those concepts, Clausewitz often employs a form of dialectical reasoning, which poses sets of opposites against one another, and seeks to explore and determine the nature of their relationship. In this sense, the trinity reveals the dialectical relationship between three competing sets of forces in war. In a broader sense, and quite apart from the various substantive concepts, a number of oppositional pairs can be observed in the theoretical realm of Clausewitz's work, each of which we will now explore in turn.

Art versus science

Clausewitz frequently drew upon aesthetic theory to help clarify his thoughts on theory. For instance, in Book 8 he explains that a 'principle that underlies our thoughts and actions will undoubtedly lend them a certain tone and character, though the immediate causes of our actions may have different origins, just as the tone a painter gives to his canvas is determined by the color of the underpainting.'¹³⁴ Likewise he also drew heavily on the physical and mechanical sciences to express certain ideas, most memorably in relation to his discussion of friction.

Clausewitz believed the answer to whether war was an art or science was of great significance, even 'indispensable'¹³⁵ because one's conclusion determined the way in which the entire subject is approached. This problem of course reflects the broad dichotomy that Clausewitz recognised as existing within military theory in the early nineteenth century. Thinkers such as Bülow sought scientific precision and ended up with limited, one-sided theories. Thinkers such as Berenhorst believed war was akin to a creative art, entirely dependent on individual genius, and ended up belittling the important role theory and knowledge could play. If neither of these approaches would suffice, Clausewitz sought the reasons for this. Book 3, Chapter 3 is taken up with a detailed discussion of this issue.

Clausewitz's discussion first seeks to determine the essential difference between the two disciplines by centring on the prime objectives of each. In science the object is 'pure knowledge' based on inquiry and, in this respect, is

¹³⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 702.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

principally associated with subjects such as mathematics or astronomy that aim at ‘fixed values’,¹³⁶ the discovery of regularities, and the identification of laws of logic, reason, and cause and effect. Pure science has no goal, no objective other than the furtherance of knowledge.¹³⁷ In art the object is ‘creative ability.’¹³⁸ Art is intended to produce an aesthetic effect, to which end it is necessary to use given means. To combine them is to create; art is thus the capacity to create. Unlike science, art is not susceptible to law-like formulas, primarily because it aims at effects on the mind.

For Clausewitz, these distinctions are misleading. All arts contain ‘discrete sciences’ such as the mathematical, geometrical elements of architecture, whilst applied science always involves an element of creativity and judgement – as Smith notes, science ‘deals with hypotheses formed by the mind, and hence requires creativity and experience.’¹³⁹ Thus, it ‘is impossible to separate art and knowledge altogether.’¹⁴⁰ The distinction is almost completely shrouded in the individual, but in their external forms the basic distinction between, on the one hand ‘inquiry and knowledge’ and, on the other ‘creation and production’ is clear.¹⁴¹ So how does this discussion apply to war?

In war, like no other activity, Clausewitz explains that the complete and ‘total assimilation’ of knowledge and ability is vital. For the commander, whatever thorough knowledge he may have absorbed from so many scientific military manuals, all this will be useless unless it can be turned into ‘genuine capability’¹⁴² at the appropriate time.¹⁴³ Books may lay down the basic

¹³⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 156.

¹³⁷ Other than perhaps in the sense of utilising that knowledge as a predictive tool or to advance civilisation in a variety of ways. However, these might be considered as secondary effects; not the purpose of science itself, but the use of scientific knowledge for wider purposes. Of course, science has consistently been applied for other purposes throughout human history, not least to enhance effectiveness in war.

¹³⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 172.

¹³⁹ Smith, *On Clausewitz*, p. 188.

¹⁴⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 173.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁴³ With regard to counterinsurgency, John Nagl makes the vital point that ‘knowing how to win... is a different thing from implementing the measures required to do it.’ Nagl personally experienced this tension between knowledge and ability because after studying and writing about counterinsurgency for a number of years, he then found himself deployed to Iraq confronting a vicious insurgency from September 2003 to September 2004. John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. xi-xii.

principles of an art but they cannot teach us 'how to do anything.'¹⁴⁴ Even if they purport to explain a certain 'art' they are not in themselves art, because art is about creating, about producing effects with available means. War is not even comparable to a mechanical art or craft,¹⁴⁵ whereby given truths can be objectively and impersonally applied to the matter in hand; 'It is never like that in war. Continual change and the need to respond to it compels the commander to carry the whole intellectual apparatus of his knowledge with him.'¹⁴⁶ In war, knowledge and ability must be alloyed. It is never enough simply 'to know' because 'absolute, so-called mathematical, factors never find a firm basis in military calculations.'¹⁴⁷ Likewise, effective creative ability is to some extent dependent on a knowledge of the relationship of things and the likely effects of given actions.

So war is strictly neither a pure art nor a pure science. It will always involve a complex interaction of the two, particularly when approached from the perspective of the individual commander. As T. E. Lawrence beautifully put it, 'Nine-tenths of tactics are certain, and taught in books: but the irrational tenth is like a kingfisher flashing across the pool, and that is the test of generals. It can only be ensured by instinct, sharpened by thought practising the stroke so often that at the crisis it is as natural as a reflex.'¹⁴⁸ It appears that, were Clausewitz forced to make a decision between the one or the other, he would state that war will always be more like an art than a science – particularly at its higher levels – primarily because of its practical and creative nature;¹⁴⁹ a conclusion that even Jomini, despite his positivism, essentially arrived at.¹⁵⁰ But Clausewitz was not content to let the matter rest there. In fact, he believed that to base analysis on the distinction between science and art 'is misleading in that it has

¹⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 172.

¹⁴⁵ 'Engineering' is the common modern analogy for such approaches.

¹⁴⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 170. Paret notes that the theory of art teaches the capacity to create so far as concepts can, thus, theory is the representation of art through concepts. Theory constitutes the whole of art save for two exceptions which theory can only acknowledge but not provide rules for: talent and practice. Practice cannot be achieved through theory, only through the application of means by the creative talent. Thus even realistic theory could never match reality. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 163.

¹⁴⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 97.

¹⁴⁸ T. E. Lawrence, 'Evolution of a Revolt', p. 9.

¹⁴⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 173.

¹⁵⁰ 'War in its ensemble is not a science, but an art. Strategy, particularly, may indeed be regulated by fixed laws resembling those of the positive sciences, but this is not true of war viewed as a whole.' Jomini, *Art of War*, p. 258.

unintentionally caused war to be put on par with other arts or sciences, resulting in a mass of incorrect analogies.’¹⁵¹

Such analogies are misleading because neither science nor art captures the unique nature of war. Whilst it may certainly involve elements of both, it is something altogether different because it ‘deals with living and moral forces’¹⁵² – it is a ‘conflict of living forces.’¹⁵³ Previously both the art and science of war viewed war as a ‘unilateral activity’ and as ‘nothing but a gradual rise from a craft to a refined mechanical art.’¹⁵⁴ Clausewitz clearly explains why war is in fact unique:

The essential difference is that war is not an exercise of the will directed at inanimate matter, as is the case with the mechanical arts, or at matter which is animate but passive and yielding, as is the case with the human mind and emotions in the fine arts. In war, the will is directed at an animate object that *reacts*. It must be obvious that the intellectual codification used in the arts and sciences is inappropriate to such an activity.¹⁵⁵

So, if war is not usefully understood as a science or art, what is it? War, he explains, is ‘part of man’s social existence.’ He suggests a better analogy may be commerce, but even that ignores the fundamental reality of war: that it is ‘clash of major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed.’¹⁵⁶ When these fundamental realities are introduced, analogies with art or science lose their force. War is inherently human and social. It takes place in a climate of danger, fear, exertion, and uncertainty. It is inherently reactive. Art and science may at times, and to some limited extent, display elements of these characteristics, but taken together war is something altogether different and unique. If it reflects any other human activity it is *politics*, because after all, as he explains, that is ‘the womb in which war develops – where its outlines already exist in their hidden rudimentary form, like the characteristics of living creatures in their embryos.’¹⁵⁷

¹⁵¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 173.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-74.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

This presents problems for theory. To what extent can theory provide laws regarding an activity involving a dynamic interaction of human forces and so universally pervaded with chance and uncertainty? Clausewitz's speculation on the elements of art and science in war, and his conclusion pertaining to its unique nature, led him to a particular conception as to the purpose and limits of any theory of war.

Anti-dogmatism versus doctrine

In 1812 Clausewitz produced an essay entitled, 'The most important principles of the art of war to complete my course of instruction for his Royal Highness the Crown Prince' and is more commonly known as *The Principles of War*.¹⁵⁸ The ideas Clausewitz noted down for the young Frederick William¹⁵⁹ have often been read as a form of 'executive summary' of the content of *On War* and has thus led some to accuse Clausewitz of a narrow doctrinaire approach.¹⁶⁰ As Bassford recounts, one reviewer claimed Clausewitz had condensed 'all of the principles and maxims that he subsequently expanded in *On War*.'¹⁶¹ This, however, would be a mistaken conclusion. As Bassford notes, 'Unfortunately, it has often been treated as a summary of Clausewitz's mature theory—which it most emphatically is not. Rather, it is only a primitive precursor to his later *magnum opus* – *On War*. Its subject matter is largely tactical.'¹⁶²

As Strachan has noted, 'much of *On War* is written with a forthrightness that can easily be mistaken for dogma'¹⁶³ and Aron has likewise observed that, 'It is the systematic character of the Treatise which has sometimes made superficial readers confuse it with dogmatism.'¹⁶⁴ It is clear from Clausewitz's work that 'dogmatic' was precisely the epithet he wished to avoid. Indeed, a

¹⁵⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *The Principles of War*, trans. and ed. Hans W. Gatzke (New York: Dover Publications, 2003).

¹⁵⁹ Later King Frederick William IV.

¹⁶⁰ Parkinson somewhat misleadingly describes the work as a 'miniature and more personal version of *On War*, one which reflected the peculiar circumstances in which Prussia now found herself. Indeed, the principles were an important step towards *On War*. Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 138.

¹⁶¹ Quoted by Bassford 'Introduction'. Available online at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/PrincWar/Princwr1.htm>>, retrieved 4 July 2008.

¹⁶² Bassford, 'Introduction'.

¹⁶³ Strachan, 'Dialectics', p. 17.

¹⁶⁴ Aron, *Clausewitz*, p. 51.

pronounced anti-dogmatic streak characterises his approach. This is revealed in the heading of a section of Book 2, Chapter 2 entitled, 'Theory Should Be Study, Not Doctrine.' In this section he states that 'a theory need not be a positive doctrine, a sort of *manual* for action.'¹⁶⁵ Theory should be seen more as a 'guide': far from dictating exactly what the commander should do on the battlefield, it is intended more to 'light his way, ease his progress, train his judgement, and help him to avoid pitfalls.'¹⁶⁶ This sentiment is expressed in one of his earlier historical studies on the 1814 campaign in France, in which he states that, 'Of course...here as in all practical matters theory has the function to form the practical man and to educate his judgement, rather than to assist him directly in the execution of his tasks.'¹⁶⁷ Clausewitz emphatically states that, 'it is simply not possible to construct a model for the art of war that can serve as a scaffolding on which the commander can rely for support at any time.'¹⁶⁸ History's great commanders did not rely on such doctrinaire guidance: indeed 'anyone who thought it necessary to begin the education of a future general with a knowledge of all the details has always been scoffed at as a ridiculous pedant.'¹⁶⁹

Here Clausewitz differed from his contemporary Jomini who, in the conclusion to his work stated that, 'Correct theories, founded upon right principles...will form a true school of instruction for generals.'¹⁷⁰ Indeed, as Brodie notes, Jomini has been 'endlessly quoted for the remark: 'methods change but principles are unchanging.'¹⁷¹ Paret is scathing when he states that Jomini 'pursued an arbitrary number of facts and observations through a disorganised argument to a dogmatic end.'¹⁷² Like Thucydides before him, Clausewitz 'is less interested in telling his readers what to think than in teaching them how to

¹⁶⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 162. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 163. This is precisely why Clausewitz believed many previous theorists had gone wrong. They had attempted to provide 'algebraic formula for use on the battlefield' where the most that theory should aim to do is to provide a 'frame of reference' and 'educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield', p. 163. Compare this with Jomini who stated that, 'The idea of reducing the system of war to its fundamental combination, on which all else depends, and which will provide the basis for a simple and accurate theory, offers numerous advantages: it will make instruction easier, operational judgements sounder, and mistakes less frequent.' Shy, 'Jomini', p. 152.

¹⁶⁷ Clausewitz, 'Campaign of 1814', p. 205.

¹⁶⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 161.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 168.

¹⁷⁰ Jomini, *Art of War*, p. 261.

¹⁷¹ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd, 1974), p. 446.

¹⁷² Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 205.

think.’¹⁷³ This belief also has its direct analogue in the realm of critical analysis of past wars and campaigns. The critic, Clausewitz insists, should not study a particular case through a ‘mechanical application of theory’, but rather theories are ‘there to be used when needed, and their suitability...must always be a matter of judgement. A critic should never use the results of theory as laws and standards, but only – as the soldier does – as *aids to judgement*.’¹⁷⁴ Just as ‘scientific guidelines’ are inappropriate tools on the battlefield, so they are in critical analysis where truths must be grasped ‘through the natural perception of the mind.’¹⁷⁵

The earlier tendency of ascribing all detailed knowledge to theory, whilst reserving the play of genius for a realm beyond theory constituted a serious contradiction with reality.¹⁷⁶ Clausewitz, rejecting this idea and borrowing from Kant’s aesthetics,¹⁷⁷ states: ‘No; what genius does is the best rule’¹⁷⁸ – it is the source of the rules.¹⁷⁹ In other words, theory can never create or produce genius, but that genius is an element of the reality of war is confirmed by experience. Therefore, theory must acknowledge the importance and scope for ‘special talent’¹⁸⁰ and not be tempted into ‘simple-minded pedantry.’¹⁸¹ Otherwise, the

¹⁷³ Paul A. Rahe, ‘Thucydides as educator’, in Williamson Murray and Richard Hart Sinnreich (eds.), *The Past as Prologue: The Importance of History to the Military Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 99.

¹⁷⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 183.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁷⁶ This idea was introduced by Enlightenment thinkers, such as Diderot, who held that genius transcended the rules. This was reflected in military theory by the belief that anything that could not be explained empirically must belong to the sublime element of war in which genius operated beyond the rules. As Gat notes, Lloyd believed the sublime part of war ‘cannot be studied, and falls totally in the province of creative genius’ and Bülow held that while part of the art of war could be ‘reduced to rules and principles, another part...was perpetually wavering, and required application by creative genius.’ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 72.

¹⁷⁷ Kant, in his third critique had argued that, ‘Genius is the innate psychological power through which nature establishes the rules for the arts.’ These ideas were popularised by Kiesewetter who taught at the Berlin school where Clausewitz was a young student. This represented a departure from earlier thinking on the subject. The neo-classicists of the seventeenth century had believed genius was essentially the manifestation of the rules: the idea that genius is action in conformity with underlying rules was thus essentially the inverse of Kant’s conception. See Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, pp. 160-61.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157. Clausewitz notes that, ‘genius, dear sirs, never acts contrary to the rules.’ Quoted in Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 178.

¹⁷⁹ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 161. If genius were above the rules that would constitute an admission that the ‘rules are not only made for idiots but are idiotic in themselves.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 216.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

theory produced would amount to an ‘underworld of ponderous concepts where no great commander, with his effortless *coup d’oeil*, was ever seen.’¹⁸²

Clausewitz did not, however, reject the potential for expressing concrete propositions where logic and reality, in a sense, forced conclusions on the theorist:

If the theorist’s studies automatically result in principles and rules, and if truth spontaneously crystallises into these forms, theory will not resist this natural tendency of the mind. On the contrary, where the arch of truth culminates in such a keystone, this tendency will be underlined. But this is simply in accordance with the scientific law of reason, to indicate the point where all lines converge.¹⁸³

But, the number of ideas in *On War* that Clausewitz would allow in this category were few and far between. We might conclude that only the elements of the trinity achieved this status, perhaps representing the very keystone that held together his many other ideas: the ‘point where all lines converge.’

So, it was not Clausewitz’s aim to develop a utilitarian theory, but rather one that was predominantly analytic, descriptive, and didactic: theory can teach but it cannot prescribe. *On War* is a work of analysis not advocacy.¹⁸⁴ What was the point of producing a theory which genius could laugh at – theory cannot dictate rules to genius¹⁸⁵ – and that the man of limited ability could learn by rote but fail to convert into success in practice. Aron makes the crucial point that for Clausewitz, ‘It is the theory which indicates that the responsibility for decision is thrown back on the man of action.’¹⁸⁶ This was an approach consistent with contemporary German notion of *Bildung*, or self-direction and autonomous judgement.¹⁸⁷ Theory can offer sound insights into the ‘great mass of phenomena’ associated with war, but then leaves the mind to ‘rise into the higher realms of action.’¹⁸⁸ Theory teaches that the essence of genius is that it is creative, not imitative; it can transcend existing rules, but in doing so it creates

¹⁸² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 698.

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 163.

¹⁸⁴ Paret, *Understanding*, p. 4.

¹⁸⁵ Aron, *Clausewitz*, p. 220.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁸⁷ See Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 7-9.

¹⁸⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 698.

new ones. Hew Strachan believes that it was precisely this 'refusal to embrace fixed conclusions' that explains the longevity of *On War*.¹⁸⁹ Brodie contrasts Clausewitz approach with the modern inclination, 'in various army field manuals...to encapsulate centuries of experience and volumes of reflections into a few tersely worded and usually numbered 'principles of war' and concludes that, 'Clausewitz would have been appalled at such attempts, and not surprised at some of the terrible blunders that have been made in the name of those principles.'¹⁹⁰ As the great Union general of the American Civil War, Ulysses S. Grant commented, 'If men make war in slavish obedience to rules, they will fail.'¹⁹¹

These points are extremely important because they clearly reveal what Clausewitz was *not* attempting to provide through his theory. Also, it gives the lie to those who believe Clausewitz to be the intellectual progenitor of World War I. As Strachan explains, 'the short term accusation, voiced by Basil Liddell Hart, was that his pupils had put the idea of absolute war into practice with disastrous effect.'¹⁹² In affect, he put the blame for the war squarely on Clausewitz. Liddell-Hart, in his *The Ghost of Napoleon*, called Clausewitz 'the Mahdi of mass and mutual massacre' and claimed that the generals became 'intoxicated with the blood-red wine of Clausewitzian growth.'¹⁹³ Keegan also weighed in, stating in his *History of Warfare*, that Clausewitz bore 'weighty responsibility' for the conduct of the War.¹⁹⁴ Even if it was the case that certain high-profile commanders, such as Ferdinand Foch, took a certain message from Clausewitz and let it guide their actions, then they are surely guilty of a wilful misreading and misuse of *On War*.

Regardless of the supposed substantive content of his theory (which is the subject of later chapters), Clausewitz did not set down hard and fast rules that should be followed unconsciously or without regard to unique circumstances. This was not just an implicit feature of his work, but manifestly explicit. Book 2 of *On War* almost amounts to a plea not to read his work in that way.

¹⁸⁹ Strachan, 'Dialectics', p. 18.

¹⁹⁰ Brodie, *War and Politics*, p. 446.

¹⁹¹ Quoted in Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Kings Lynn: Routledge, 2006), p. 3.

¹⁹² Strachan, 'Dialectics', p. 26.

¹⁹³ Basil Liddell Hart quoted in Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 672.

¹⁹⁴ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 21.

Commanders, faced with the problems of the moment will always search for direct routes to success, and thus are wont to skate over the sections of a work that do not provide such practical, and indeed, psychological comfort. And here is the irony. The very weakness of the intellectual capacity of commanders not imbued with the qualities of natural talent so clearly described by Clausewitz, would be precisely those desperate to read their way out of difficult situations, looking for the type of principles in *On War* that Clausewitz would more or less reject: he would not provide petty rules to follow because ‘petty things will make a petty mind.’¹⁹⁵ A petty mind is insufficient for a commander faced with the vast complexity of war.

This is not to deny that Clausewitz does indeed articulate various principles¹⁹⁶ or that the weight of his ideas lean towards favouring a certain form of warfare. However, principles in *On War* always remain conditional. One might accuse him for not being clear enough in this respect, but this is simply not supported by the text. First, the limits to his ‘system’ are repeatedly expressed, and often through metaphors that should not escape even the casual readers eye.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, in almost all cases where Clausewitz expresses some principle or another, and no matter how forcibly stated, they are accompanied by qualifying remarks.¹⁹⁸ As Alan Beyerchen notes, even his ‘most Newtonian-sounding analogy of a ‘centre of gravity’ becomes swamped in qualifications and caveats intended to convey the complexity of war.’¹⁹⁹ So, regardless of the substantive nuances of his ideas, and even without an appreciation of the unfinished nature of *On War*, the theoretical foundations of the work are enough to reveal such accusations as hollow and misleading: they fail to grasp the underlying basis, the very purpose of his work. If this is the case, why the accusers seek to find the origins of the ‘total wars’ of the twentieth century in the

¹⁹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 168.

¹⁹⁶ Clausewitz states that a ‘whole range of propositions can be demonstrated without difficulty.’ Clausewitz, ‘Unfinished Note’, p. 80.

¹⁹⁷ For instance: theory should not accompany the commander to the battlefield, ‘just as a wise teacher guides and stimulates a young man’s intellectual development, but is careful not to lead him by the hand for the rest of his life.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 163.

¹⁹⁸ For just one example amongst many, in his discussion of the principle that ‘the destruction of the enemy’s force underlies all military actions’, this is persistently qualified by such phrases as, this aim ‘is not always encountered in reality, and need not be fully realised as condition of peace. On no account should theory raise it to the level of a law’. Ibid., p. 103,

¹⁹⁹ Alan Beyerchen, ‘Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War’, *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Winter, 1992, pp. 59-90.

writings of Clausewitz is unclear.²⁰⁰ That tendency, somewhat perversely, shifts the ‘blame’, if we can call it that, from those whose actions directly led to those events (even if they were indeed based on a mistaken or shallow reading of *On War*) or even, more impersonally, from the peculiar historical conditions of the time, human nature, and pure chance (all of which Clausewitz himself would have emphasised).

So, Clausewitz does not aim at a positive theory of war: ‘we are far from regarding our principles and the results derived from them as absolutes.’²⁰¹ Laws are not applicable in war, as they may be in the sciences, because in war there exist numerous subjective and intangible factors that are not susceptible to objective laws, yet which are timeless aspects of its conduct.²⁰² He stresses the difficulty of developing theory because of the often large distances between causes and effects, the continuous interaction of opposites, the impact of changing conditions, and the play of intangible forces that theory can never quite define.²⁰³ Yet, despite these limitations, as Creveld notes, theory ‘can aspire to save the strategist from the need to think out everything from the beginning, and provides him with a starting point for thought. In so far as the theory is sound, such a starting point is certainly not without value.’²⁰⁴ Clausewitz’s anti-doctrinaire view of what theory should be depended crucially on his contention that it should not conflict with the reality of war in all its complexity – it is to that issue we now turn.

²⁰⁰ The equation seems to be as crude as saying that, because some important commanders read Clausewitz and admitted to being influenced by his ideas, combined with the fact that those wars seemed to reflect certain aspects of his work, then a direct causal relationship exists. This crude logic crucially ignores two points. First, the mediating process of the readers interpretation of the work (which is at the mercy of that person’s intellectual capacity). Second, it ignores the complexities of the work itself (of course, itself always subject to interpretation, but the truth of which can be approached through detailed study). The fact that a connection exists and *appears* convincing is not to prove guilt. In fact, the evidence points firmly in the opposite direction. The proclivity to blame Clausewitz may result from a psychological need to blame *somebody*, thereby absolving human-kind itself of guilt and making progressivist, utopian futures, where such wars do not occur, more realistic and realisable.

²⁰¹ Clausewitz, ‘Campaign of 1814’, p. 208.

²⁰² Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 154.

²⁰³ In relation to friction he notes that ‘it is a force that theory can never quite define. Even if it could the development of instinct and tact would still be needed.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 140.

²⁰⁴ Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 116.

Theory versus reality

In his panegyric to his late friend and mentor, Clausewitz described the qualities of Scharnhorst's mind which made for such 'apt and forceful ideas':

a penetrating intellect that is not joined to a powerful imagination will favor theoretical constructs and speculative thought only so far as they coincide with reason and with the appearances of this world. At the point where imagination leads the brilliant systematizer beyond specifics, Scharnhorst would quietly turn back and direct his energies toward reconciling ideas and reality, carefully fusing the two by theoretical and historical analysis, as the particular issue demanded...In war mere imagination has no creative power at all, while the truth that emerges from the congruence of reality and analysis is indispensable.²⁰⁵

This quote, ostensibly about Scharnhorst, lucidly reflects the approach that Clausewitz felt was vital for understanding war, whilst simultaneously revealing his huge debt to his mentor.²⁰⁶ In criticising such flights of the imagination, Clausewitz perhaps had in mind the abstract philosophers associated with German Idealism. Although not unsympathetic towards their general project, Clausewitz was adamant that in such a practical activity as war, pure abstract theorising would lead the thinker into 'dazzling and flowery fantasies',²⁰⁷ that would have little applicability in reality. In an essay entitled 'The Germans and the French', Clausewitz commented on how the German intellect, 'instead of taking immediate pleasure in the correspondence of its ideas to reality...delves deeply into the nature of things, into abstractions, and strives for complete understanding.' This he says 'often damages his usefulness in practical, particularly, political life.'²⁰⁸ For Clausewitz, a theory that cannot apply to reality is largely useless: 'Presumptuous philosophy deserves contempt and derision when it seeks to raise us high above the activities of the day so that we can escape their pressures' because individual generations 'do not exist to

²⁰⁵ Clausewitz, 'On the life and character of Scharnhorst', p. 100.

²⁰⁶ Paret notes that, 'No military theorist at the time was as conscious as Scharnhorst of the innate conflict between theory and reality. His elaboration of this fundamental issue, and his refusal to seek its solution in increasingly complex abstractions, constitute the most important lesson he taught Clausewitz.' Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 71.

²⁰⁷ Clausewitz, 'On the life and character of Scharnhorst', p. 99.

²⁰⁸ See Clausewitz, 'The Germans and the French', in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 57. See also Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 94.

observe the world; by constantly striving for rational goals they *are* the world...'²⁰⁹ A similar concern is highlighted in *On War* when Clausewitz asks, what is the practical value of 'obscure, partially false, confused and arbitrary notions? Very little – so little that they have made theory, from its beginnings, the very opposite of practice, and not infrequently the laughing-stock of men whose military competence is beyond dispute.'²¹⁰

Clausewitz's practical nature could not but persuade him as to the utter futility of speculative notions that conflicted with reality and 'where the author himself no longer knows just what he is thinking and soothes himself with obscure ideas which would not satisfy him if expressed in plain speech.'²¹¹ Scharnhorst taught his student to 'oppose artificial and learned theorising by encouraging a certain naturalness of thought, which defeats empty phraseology and brings the false conflict between theory and practice to an end.'²¹² There is strong evidence that a great deal of Clausewitz's approach derives from Scharnhorst's influence. For instance, consider this summary of the line of argument of one of Scharnhorst's works by Gat:

An inherent interdependence exists between theory and reality. First one needs clear concepts and principles...[that] are necessarily based on the nature of things, and there is no knowledge without them. Then one must understand the actual operation of these concepts and principles in action, for reason alone is not sufficient for developing reality. The application of the concepts and principles to reality requires judgement, which is in turn sharpened by experience and constant exercise, the major means of which is historical study.²¹³

This description could almost be mistaken for an outline of the methodological approach adopted by Clausewitz. For instance, Clausewitz states that 'the knowledge basic to the art of war is empirical. While, for the most part, it is derived from the nature of things, this very nature is usually revealed to us only

²⁰⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, 'Notes on History and Politics', in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 270. In the same piece he states, 'It is today that makes tomorrow, the present that creates the future. Those who wait foolishly on the future will find it mangled by their own idle hands.'

²¹⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 198.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

²¹² Clausewitz, 'On the life and character of Scharnhorst', p. 104.

²¹³ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 163.

by experience.’²¹⁴ What abstract, logical theorising there is in *On War* – and there is plenty, particularly in Books 1 and 8 – is always restrained by a forceful collision with reality, as Scharnhorst had taught.

The way in which Book 1, Chapter 1 sways from the abstract to the concrete and back again can be a cause of mental ‘sea-sickness’ for some, but that is simply the result of a mind that was never content to rest in the comfort of one or the other, preferring instead the challenge of searching out the points at which the two meet and cease to contradict each other. This is why grasping this dialectic in Clausewitz’s approach is so important – without it one cannot follow the progression of his thought or understand what he was trying to achieve through the explication of his concepts.²¹⁵ In an oft quoted passage, Clausewitz held that he never avoided logical conclusions, ‘but whenever the thread became too thin I have preferred to break it off and go back to the relevant phenomenon of experience. Just as some plants bear fruit only if they don’t shoot up too high, so in the practical arts the leaves and flowers of theory must be pruned and the plant kept close to its proper soil – experience.’²¹⁶

Clausewitz frequently employed a deductive approach to explore the boundaries of theoretical concepts: historical accounts of reality would never entirely suffice because, as Scharnhorst had recognised, ‘experience without philosophy is devoid of meaning.’²¹⁷ The use of pure reasoning is most apparent in Clausewitz’s later work. For instance, Book 8, Chapter 2 is an excellent example in this respect. Logically, he states, it would appear that the complete overthrow of the enemy should govern all war plans (the actual possibility of which was revealed in Napoleon’s campaigns). That all wars do not reach such extremes might be explained by limiting factors inherent in the ‘war-machine’ and ‘natural inertia’, but these are insufficient to ‘span the gap between the pure concept of war and the concrete form.’ Ultimately, reconciliation is only achieved when it is accepted that ‘war and its forms result from ideas, emotions, and conditions prevailing at the time’ in relation to which ‘strictly logical

²¹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 199.

²¹⁵ After outlining the essential types of resistance in Chapter 6 of Book 8 on ‘Defence’, Clausewitz notes how, ‘We have linked those simple ideas with reality, and so demonstrated how to move from reality to these simple ideas and achieve a solid analytic base. In the course of debate we will therefore not need to resort to arguments that themselves are ephemeral.’ This passage is indicative of his general approach. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 461.

²¹⁶ Clausewitz, ‘Authors Preface’, in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 69.

²¹⁷ Strachan, ‘Dialectics’, p. 38.

reasoning often plays no part at all and is apt to be a most unsuitable and awkward intellectual tool.’ The logical absolute retains its usefulness as a ‘general point of reference’, but reality has its own necessity, not determined by abstract reasoning, but by particular conditions that always makes war ‘a matter of degree’. All the wars fought ‘since the days of Alexander...down to Bonaparte’ cannot be rejected simply because they do not equate to the theoretical ideal, rather the divergence must be explained and the antinomy resolved.²¹⁸ In this, as elsewhere, his inclination to speculate led him to ‘illusory mental exercises’,²¹⁹ whilst ultimately he always remained firmly anchored to reality: his use of abstract reasoning was not a consequence of intellectual pretension, but rather a conscious method of revealing fundamental truths in war.

So, as the counterweight to pure theory, ‘experience’ for Clausewitz was employed as a broad realm that encompassed two central aspects, both concerned with what we might term the reality of war: these were history and personal experience.²²⁰ Following Scharnhorst – and considering his work as exemplary in this respect²²¹ – Clausewitz held that history provided the theorist with a vast reservoir of experience: ‘Historical examples clarify everything and also provide the best kind of proof in the empirical sciences’²²² and ‘experience counts for more than any amount of abstract truths.’²²³ As Paret and Moran note, Clausewitz held that, ‘Without the instrument of history, theory should not be constructed... History not only tested and validated his theories, it gave rise to some of them.’²²⁴ But for Clausewitz, this meant much more than familiarity with a few history books. It wasn’t simply the case, as Livy once put it, that history is a ‘record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see.’²²⁵ As Howard notes, the ‘exercise of history had itself to be an exercise in critical judgement.’²²⁶ A detailed basis of such critical historical

²¹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 700-03.

²¹⁹ Clausewitz, ‘Campaign of 1812’, p. 116.

²²⁰ In a similar fashion Basil Liddell Hart distinguished between direct and indirect practical experience. The former relating to personal experience of war, the latter to the universal experience of history. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, pp. 3-4.

²²¹ See Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 164.

²²² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 199.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

²²⁴ Paret and Moran, ‘Introduction to Part One’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 3.

²²⁵ Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London, Penguin, 2002), p. 30.

²²⁶ Howard, *Clausewitz*, p. 31.

study is masterfully adumbrated by Clausewitz in Book 2 of *On War*.²²⁷ For Clausewitz, the critical study of the past presents the theorist with something approaching recorded reality, and thus history becomes the starting point for theoretical analysis.²²⁸ It also serves to confirm genuine advances in cognition.

The other potential source of observations on war's reality was of course personal, first-hand experience. It is certainly rare to find thinkers on war who combine the qualities required of both the soldier and the philosopher.²²⁹ Like Thucydides before him, Clausewitz's own experiences of war greatly added to the depths of his comprehension of the realities of war.²³⁰ Many sections of *On War* and his historical studies draw upon, albeit often implicitly, his own recollections of campaigns and battles in which he fought.²³¹ He also suggests that perhaps only those who have experienced war first-hand can truly be in a position to emphasise aspects of war that may evade the armchair theorist. For instance, the danger, fear, and friction that affect war so greatly may not be directly apparent to the mere spectator: as Clausewitz pithily remarks, 'in one's library these elements are not known.'²³² That these factors play such an integral role in his theory owes a great deal, not only to influential forerunners who had emphasised these points, but also to his first-hand knowledge of war. As he notes, 'theorists who have never learned to generalise from experience, are impractical and even ridiculous: they teach only what is already common knowledge.'²³³ The difficult task, however, was translating these experiences

²²⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 181-98.

²²⁸ As Strachan notes, if in general terms history provided the seed-bed for Clausewitz's theoretical insights – as is certainly the case – in *On War* itself the reverse is true, as history is primarily utilised in the book to illustrate theory and explain concepts. Strachan, 'Dialectics', pp. 38-39.

²²⁹ As Creveld notes, Clausewitz 'was not only a practical soldier. He was that, but he was also a philosopher who asked, not merely how war ought to be made, but what its real nature is.' Creveld, 'Eternal', p. 46.

²³⁰ As Robert Kaplan notes, 'Thucydides' Peloponnesian War is the work not merely of a historian, but of someone who has known firsthand disease, battle, and political humiliation, and encounters with both sides.' Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), p. 45.

²³¹ His study of the 1812 Campaign is more overtly personal in character. Clausewitz, 'Campaign of 1812', pp. 113-204.

²³² Ibid, p. 166. On the subject of friction, in *On War*, Clausewitz notes that, 'Those who know of war only from books or the parade-ground cannot recognize the existence of these impediments to action, and so we must ask them to accept on faith what they lack in experience.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 211.

²³³ Ibid., p. 139.

into theory, and expressing them in the form of coherent and comprehensible concepts.

So, Clausewitz conceived of a near ceaseless interaction between reasoning and experience. They should be in constant dialogue with one another as neither is much use to theory in isolation. The practical soldier in him led to a tendency to favour practice, but if theory was to improve men's understanding of the phenomenon then it had to make sense of the reality through philosophy: 'Analysis and observation, theory and experience must never disdain each other; on the contrary, they support each other.'²³⁴ The two are mutually supportive as practice requires understanding, whilst theory should not render itself useless by becoming detached from reality (the latter being a problem particularly noted in recent times in relation to nuclear strategy).²³⁵ The importance of resolving this tension is revealed in a notably heated outburst in *On War* when Clausewitz states that theory,

only needs intelligent treatment to make it conform to action, and to end the absurd difference between theory and practice that unreasonable theories have so often evoked. That difference, which defies common sense, has often been used as a pretext by limited and ignorant minds to justify their congenital incompetence.²³⁶

There is, however, still one area of reality that we have yet to discuss and which represents yet another area that theory must be able to encompass if it is to retain its relevance. History not only revealed to Clausewitz the incredible variety of wars in the past, but opened his eyes to vast potential of the future. This sentiment is revealed in a section in which Clausewitz is speculating on whether the sort of limited wars, common throughout history, will reoccur: 'Worse still, we should be bound to say that in spite of our theory there may even be other

²³⁴ Clausewitz, 'Author's Preface', in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 69.

²³⁵ This was evident during the Cold War when teams of civilian strategists and so-called 'systems analysts', with no direct experience of military affairs and with no historical empirical evidence on which to base their analyses, attempted to formulate strategies for the threat or use of nuclear weapons. Their theories, perhaps somewhat understandably, represent extremes of the speculative and abstract approach Clausewitz criticised. They achieved their conclusions only by radically simplifying reality, concentrating on statistically tractable problems, positing a-cultural rational actors, downplaying emotional and psychological factors, and making assumptions that might not pertain in actual scenarios (such as two-person and zero-sum parameters). See Hedley Bull, 'Strategic Studies and its Critics', *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 4, July 1968, pp. 600-01.

²³⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 164.

wars of this kind in the next ten years, and that our theory [of absolute war], though strictly logical, would not apply to reality.’²³⁷ This reveals that Clausewitz was not only concerned about the reality of war recorded in history or that he had experienced, but also with that which was yet to come and which theory could not ignore.

Material and psychological factors

The emphasis that Clausewitz placed on the importance of experience led him to another crucial aspect of his theory. In earlier times, Clausewitz notes how the study of war concerned ‘only the total body of knowledge and skill that was concerned with material factors.’²³⁸ As such, war ‘would hardly provide a scientific problem for a schoolboy.’²³⁹ Previously, most theorists had directed almost all their attention to physical matters such as issues of numerical superiority of troop numbers, supply, geometry, and even geology.²⁴⁰ These theories, he explains, were about as useful ‘to combat as the craft of the swordsmith to the art of fencing. It did not yet include the use of force under constant conditions of danger...nor the efforts of spirit and courage to achieve a desired end.’²⁴¹ Those thinkers, such as Saxe, Lloyd and, even Napoleon himself, had placed significant emphasis on the importance of psychological and moral forces, but rather as addendums or only in a haphazard manner.²⁴² For instance, in his *Reveries*, Saxe noted how, in war, ‘the solution lies in human hearts’ and that this matter is the ‘most important, the most learned and the most profound, of the profession of war.’²⁴³ Nevertheless, his general insights on that subject are not given a sound theoretical basis, no matter what excuses he gave

²³⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 702.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 153.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 208.

²⁴⁰ Clausewitz discusses this in relation to Mathieu Dumas who ‘discovered that the fundamental principle lay in possession of the higher ground. By way of numerous half truths and doubtful conclusions this led to a highly picturesque system of geological analogies. The neighbours of the clouds, the highest mountain peaks, rule the land below them, while the rivers become the couriers of their might. The art of war seems to arise geologically from the bowels of the earth.’ Clausewitz, ‘On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst’, p. 103.

²⁴¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 153.

²⁴² Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, pp. 157-58.

²⁴³ Saxe, *Reveries*, p. 18.

for the 'irregularity of the arrangement, as well as the inelegance of the style' of his work.²⁴⁴

Progressing beyond these limited systems, Clausewitz emphasised that an observation of reality revealed the fact that so-called 'moral forces' are fundamental to understanding war and must be incorporated in theory: previous theories had directed their inquiries predominantly 'toward physical quantities, whereas all military action is intertwined with psychological forces and effects.'²⁴⁵ Clausewitz argues that, whilst material factors may yield to the application of reason, war, as a human social activity is universally bound up with intangible factors where the 'rules dissolve into nothing but vague ideas.'²⁴⁶ Just as Goethe revealed a man's physical weakness to be relative by describing how he can be 'so enraged by an insult that he takes on six opponents and overcomes them,'²⁴⁷ so Clausewitz stressed that analysis of physical factors alone was insufficient for understanding war. Clausewitz emphasised that, 'All these and similar effects in the sphere of mind and spirit have been proved by experience: they recur constantly, and are therefore entitled to receive their due as objective factors. What indeed would become of a theory that ignored them?'²⁴⁸ It was therefore the task of theory to 'analyse emotional forces of all kinds: the psychology of the individual and the psychology of the group.'²⁴⁹

Clausewitz thus developed concepts that he felt best expressed these factors, such as genius, passion, morale, courage, military virtues, and so forth. We will return to many of these substantive issues throughout this thesis, but here it is enough to note that their incorporation into theory was crucial and in many respects mirrors what he felt was the existing dichotomy between theory and practice (theory had a tendency to focus on material factors, as distinct from practice which was inevitably pervaded by moral forces). Yet, he acknowledged this was an enormously difficult task: conceptualisation of these factors would always be limited because they relate to values that 'can only be perceived by the

²⁴⁴ Saxe claimed that he wrote his work whilst sick with fever.

²⁴⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 156.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 157.

²⁴⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (London: Penguin, 1989), p. 62.

²⁴⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 158.

²⁴⁹ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 373.

inner eye, which differs in each person.’²⁵⁰ He did not believe that such aspects of war could be quantified or calculated, but that they must be recognised as an integral element of war and studied as far as these inherent limitations allow.

Moreover, what theoretical observations that are made must be based on experience: ‘no theorist, and no commander, should bother himself with psychological and philosophical sophistries.’²⁵¹ Perhaps Clausewitz had in mind here some of the earlier thinkers, such as Berenhorst, who had over-played these psychological and moral factors or emphasised them in a manner that precluded sound theoretical insights. The recognition of such factors should not, Clausewitz held, preclude the articulation of clear concepts derived from detailed study – he did not entirely reject the possibility of a scientific approach to the study of war, even when intangibles were involved. He admitted that ‘theory becomes infinitely more difficult as soon as it touches the realm of moral values’²⁵² – and this explains why he held strategy to be less susceptible to theoretical principles than tactics, which was concerned mostly with material problems²⁵³ – but that if astutely analysed they can at least be conveyed in the form of appropriate concepts and find their place next to physical aspects in theory.

Just as theory had to reconcile ideas and practice, so too did it need to reconcile material and ‘moral factors.’²⁵⁴ Clausewitz held that moral and physical forces ‘cannot be separated’ and should be conceived as ‘an organic whole which, unlike a metal alloy, is inseparable by chemical processes.’²⁵⁵ Clausewitz held that moral forces could be the most decisive in war: ‘One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapons, the finely-honed blade.’²⁵⁶

²⁵⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 158. Clausewitz notes how Napoleon’s troops stood remarkably firm in the face of ‘unrelenting fire’ because of their long exposure to such danger and the spirit inspired in them by numerous victories. Yet, some forces such as the Tatars, Cossacks, and Croats ‘can easily be scattered by a few rounds of artillery’, p. 200.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217. The importance of moral over material factors was of course starkly revealed in the Vietnam War. Harry Summers relates a telling story, popular towards the end of the war: ‘When the Nixon administration took over in 1969 all the data on North Vietnam and on the United States was fed into a Pentagon computer – population, gross national product, manufacturing capability, number of tanks, ships, and aircraft, size of the armed forces, and the

Napoleon had reached a similar conclusion when he stated that ‘the moral is to the physical as three to one.’²⁵⁷ One of the principal dangers of abstract theorising was its tendency to ignore such intangible, yet often decisive elements of war because they do not translate neatly into mathematical formulae or doctrinal precepts. The emphasis on psychological factors only reinforced Clausewitz’s belief that theory should not be dogmatic – for instance, what theory could actually teach courage in the face of danger. All theory could do is acknowledge their importance. The trinity fundamentally embodies the play of both physical and moral forces – all three tendencies are determined by the continuous and complex interplay of these two forces.

The universal versus the particular

Aron has observed that ‘strategic thought draws its inspiration each century, or rather at each moment of history, from the problems which events themselves pose.’²⁵⁸ And so, the eighteenth century theorists, in their attempts to create a timeless science of war, focused too heavily on their own times and paradoxically sacrificed universal application to contemporary relevance and perhaps social acclaim.²⁵⁹ The great Napoleonic campaigns of the early nineteenth century dominated the minds of all military thinkers in Clausewitz’s day, and how could they not? Those cataclysmic events not only seemed to represent a whole new form of war, but for active officers like Clausewitz, analysis of them was powerfully linked to action. Theory, as we have seen, had to be closely linked to reality – not only in the interest of methodological rigour, but, given the context, also for the sake of national survival. As Howard notes,

like. The computer was then asked, ‘When will we win?’ It took only a moment to give the answer: ‘You won in 1964!’ Harry Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2003), p. 11.

²⁵⁷ Quoted in Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 242.

²⁵⁸ Quoted in Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and History: Essays on theory and practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. xi.

²⁵⁹ As Luvaas notes, those theorists ‘were far too pragmatic to worry about formulating maxims that would apply for all time...One should read Frederick, Saxe, and Guibert for what they tell us of military problems in their own day, for that was their persistent purpose in writing.’ Jay Luvaas, ‘The Great Military Historians and Philosophers’, in John E. Jessop and Robert W. Coakley, *A Guide to the Study and Use of Military History* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1988), p. 69.

Clausewitz ‘had the practical man’s horror of abstractions that could not be directly related to the facts of the situation.’²⁶⁰

This was undoubtedly so, but Clausewitz was equally concerned, particularly in his later years, to establish those aspects of war that were universal and immutable. As Paret states, for Clausewitz, ‘to devise effective strategy and tactical measures mattered far less to him than to identify the *permanent elements of war* and come to understand how they function.’²⁶¹ He intended his work to last, that ‘it would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly might be picked up more than once by those who are interested in the subject.’²⁶² Furthermore, as Hugh Smith notes, Clausewitz believed there existed ‘a universal element in war: common and enduring features that escape change and must not be lost from view.’²⁶³ The problem of reconciling these two poles, the universal and the particular – objective and subjective knowledge – was by no means a new problem, it has occupied the minds of many great philosophers throughout history and it was ‘inherent in the minds of the military thinkers of the Enlightenment.’²⁶⁴ But, as Clausewitz understood, simple recognition of the problem was not a sufficient condition for progress toward its resolution.

Clausewitz had recognised the dangers of veering too much towards one or the other poles. Too great an emphasis on the universal leads one towards the scylla of banal generalities and dull truths. Too much emphasis on the particular led to the charybdis of mindless trivialities and sterile pedantry. As we have seen, his lingering fear of descending into dogmatism restrained him from making theoretical claims that were of relevance only to the particular circumstances under study and which would cause one to ‘drown in trivialities.’²⁶⁵ He was also acutely aware of the limits of theory and that any attempt to establish timeless truths in theory was fraught with dangers. As Clausewitz recognised, most military theorists had been over-impressed by the Napoleonic period, drawing hasty conclusions from the principles it appeared to emphasise: as he warned, ‘Whoever relies purely on the perspectives of his own

²⁶⁰ Howard, *Clausewitz*, pp. 2-3.

²⁶¹ Paret, ‘Clausewitz’, in Paret, *Makers*, p. 187. Emphasis added.

²⁶² Clausewitz, ‘Authors Comment’, in *On War*, p. 72.

²⁶³ Smith, *On Clausewitz*, p. 184.

²⁶⁴ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 49.

²⁶⁵ Clausewitz quoted in Smith, *On Clausewitz*, p. 173.

times is inclined to treat what is most recent as best.²⁶⁶ In a similar sense, he warns of the dangers, yet necessity of employing subjective experiences to construct theory.²⁶⁷

It could be argued that Clausewitz very nearly fell into this trap of particularity and subjectivism. Two key factors perhaps explain how he avoided this pitfall. First, it would be wrong to view the impact of the events of Clausewitz's times in a unitary fashion. Rather, the period Clausewitz lived through is perhaps best conceived of as being split into two principal stages, both with unique features. As Creveld explains, 'Born and raised in one set of axioms, rules, theories, beliefs, he saw it abruptly shattered by defeat and replaced by another superior to it. It was this fact...which enabled him to compare both sets, contrast them, and reflect on their relative merits.'²⁶⁸ Parkinson also draws a distinction between the 'old forms of war in 1793 and 1806, and the new in 1812, 1813, 1814 and 1815.'²⁶⁹ This variety of experience forced Clausewitz to attempt to reconcile such divergent periods of war and consider their differences and similarities, their contradictions and commonalties.²⁷⁰ Of course, simply witnessing this transition in the form of war was not sufficient to give rise to Clausewitz's mature theories, as it is clear that his contemporaries drew quite different conclusions: that the decisive Napoleonic campaign represented the apotheosis of war, and would constitute the norm henceforth.²⁷¹ A wider perspective allowed Clausewitz to avoid this trap.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, the historicist outlook, in vogue at the time, had emphasised for Clausewitz the particularity of different epochs and different cultures. As we have seen, he had great sympathy with Herder's view that different ages should be assessed in their own right, indeed, so much so that

²⁶⁶ Quoted in Strachan, 'Dialectics', p. 39.

²⁶⁷ In an evocative passage he notes, 'If no one had the right to give his views on military operations except when he is frozen, or faint from heat and thirst, or depressed from privation or fatigue, objective and accurate views would be even rarer than they are. But they would at least be subjectively valid, for the speakers experience would precisely determine his judgement.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 134.

²⁶⁸ Creveld, 'Eternal Clausewitz', pp. 46-47.

²⁶⁹ Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 310.

²⁷⁰ On this point, Paret notes how Clausewitz's recognition of a 'discontinuity between Frederick and Napoleon helped Clausewitz create a unified, all-encompassing theory of war.' Paret, *Understanding*, p. 152.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Clausewitz claimed that every age ‘would have held to its own theory of war.’²⁷² Of course, an extreme version of historicism can lead to a form of dusty antiquarianism or a relativist belief that the singularities of unique periods serve to make attempts at abstract conceptual generalisations futile. Clausewitz never went this far. He was not a relativist and did not dismiss the possibility of comparison across ages. He believed that the analyst must liberate himself from the fashions and constraints of his own age to discover those elements that are comparable, that are present in every war.²⁷³ As Smith explains, ‘If each war or campaign were genuinely unique, no lesson could ever be taken from one to another. Nor could wars of one era be of any relevance to subsequent eras.’²⁷⁴

The historicist perspective acted as a check on the tendency to universalise his own present – the Napoleonic experience – and compelled him to view it in *its own particular context*. His study of history ‘helped him avoid the error of defining Napoleonic war as the ‘correct’ war.’²⁷⁵ Furthermore, it allowed him to value and be aware not only of the vast variety and particularities of the past, but also to anticipate the infinite possibilities of the future. Paret and Moran explain that, ‘By opening up the past for us, history added to the fund of knowledge that we can acquire directly and also made possible universal concepts and generalisations across time.’²⁷⁶ Indeed, the desire to extrapolate the universal from the particular was a crucial element of Clausewitz’s historical studies, for instance in commenting on Clausewitz’s ‘Strategic Critique of the Campaign of 1814 in France’, Paret notes how, ‘To Clausewitz, the manifold uniqueness of the episode reveals the working of timeless elements.’²⁷⁷ An awareness of the incredible variety of wars throughout history forced the theorist to engage in a difficult process of distinguishing what is *essential* from what is merely *incidental*.

The trinity should essentially be viewed as the outcome of this intellectual antinomy which Clausewitz attempted to resolve. This is not to suggest that he always managed to successfully bridge the divide. Creveld notes that those sections of *On War* ‘where he comes closest to offering advice of the

²⁷² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 717.

²⁷³ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 153.

²⁷⁴ Smith, *On Clausewitz*, p. 183.

²⁷⁵ Paret, *Understanding*, p. 152.

²⁷⁶ Paret and Moran, ‘Introduction to Part One’, p. 3.

²⁷⁷ Paret in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 206.

how-to-do-it-variety...are most often regarded as hopelessly obsolete.’²⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he was determined to develop a theory of war that was universally valid, applicable to his own time as well as others, and that did not offer bland platitudes or overtly disagree with experience. As Beatrice Heuser has observed, Clausewitz ‘achieved a substantially greater level of abstraction than most of his peers by deriving his conclusions about war from the evidence of 130 historical battles which he had studied closely...without allowing himself to become bogged down in detail.’²⁷⁹

The trinity is a conceptual construct that enabled him to discriminate between those aspects of war that are objective and timeless and those that are subjective and ever-changing. The former are captured in the idea of the primary trinity, the latter in the secondary trinity as shaped by morphing contextual conditions. The primary trinity, in this sense, can perhaps be seen as the pure distillate extracted from a lengthy process of reflection and historical analysis. It is this quality which supplies the trinity with its incredible elasticity and wide applicability in relation to all historical periods and war’s manifold forms – a theory that encompasses wars as temporally distant as Sargon’s campaigns in Ancient Mesopotamia and Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, or as different in form as modern industrial ‘total wars’ and ‘small wars’ of insurgency and guerrilla tactics. It is apt here to quote at length a passage by Clausewitz that supremely encapsulates his thinking on this fundamental issue:

Philosophy teaches us to recognise the relations that essential elements bear to one another, and it would indeed be rash from this to deduce universal laws governing every single case, regardless of all haphazard influences. Those people, however, who ‘*never rise above anecdote*,’ as a great writer said, and who construct all history of individual cases – starting always with the most striking feature, the high point of the event, and digging only as deep as suits them, never get down to the general features that govern the matter. Consequently their findings will never be valid for more than a single case; indeed they will consider a philosophy that encompasses the general run of cases as a mere dream.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ Creveld, ‘The Eternal Clausewitz’, p. 35.

²⁷⁹ Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 10.

²⁸⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 448.

Reflections

In the course of writing *On War* Clausewitz had to attempt to reconcile all these apparently conflicting and contradictory elements of theory. We have seen how Clausewitz explored the extremes of these methodological dualities and sought their resolution by appropriating the most valuable aspects of each and fusing them to create a theoretical dualism, like a negotiated agreement between two conflicting parties. It is in the trinity that the fruit of these methodological labours are to be found. Clausewitz seeks to provide clear concepts derived from both logical reason and experience, which fuse material and ideational forces, and that are present in every war, yet manifest themselves according to the circumstances of the particular moment. His central conclusions represent what he believed to be the extent of objective knowledge in war and are intended not as doctrinal prescriptions, but as guides to understanding. The trinity thus represents the complete integration of the various methodological dualisms. Recognition of these points serves to impress upon the reader the underlying strength of the methodological and theoretical pillars that support his substantive insights.

Even if we do not subscribe fully to the content of Clausewitz's theory and denounce many of its prominent insights as excessively influenced by the Napoleonic experience, what should not be doubted is that Clausewitz provided a standard of excellence in terms of developing a methodology which could enable the formulation of a universal theory of war. It is a methodology that confronts the theorist with perhaps the most intractable problems in social science and deals maturely with many of the issues that continue to vex the minds of theorists today: the nature of the relationship between theory and practice, between the material and psychological, between the universal and the particular in human social affairs. It might even be argued that the direct and lucid way Clausewitz tackled these problems is superior to the often convoluted language of many modern political scientists.

Clausewitz had arrived at some of these basic ideas quite early on in his intellectual career, many imparted to him through Scharnhorst, yet the full implications of these problems for his own work only came later. In fact, we might say he swung between certain extremes of these methodological

antinomies before arriving at a more stable balance towards the end of his life. In crude terms, his early life was inevitably dominated with the particular experience of his times and practical matters relating to the wars he was fighting. After 1815 he then perhaps swung too far towards the abstract in a desire to determine the universal concept, formulating a logical notion of war that conflicted with historical reality. As Strachan notes, 'The early Clausewitz was a practical soldier, the later Clausewitz was more the scholar.'²⁸¹ The Clausewitz who wrote Book 1, Chapter 1 represented more the compromise between these two perspectives. This is not to argue that he was not always aware of the underlying theoretical problems, but that his concerns at different times pulled him down different paths. Also, where these poles (between the abstract and real for instance) are presented almost side-by-side in *On War*, this is usually a conscious choice. The reader is presented with extremes derived from both logic and reality, and then their inherent unity and mutual dependence is powerfully revealed. These forays toward extremes – both intentional and unintentional; in his work and throughout his life – only served to strengthen the form of his final trinitarian synthesis, concerned as it was to bridge these difficult methodological divides.

This analysis is fundamental for understanding the crucial importance of the place of the trinity in Clausewitz's work because it represents the final outcome of years of comprehensive and rigorous study. This not only explains the greater value of those sections written towards the end of his life, but goes a long way to explaining the weakness of other, earlier sections. The fact that *On War* is incomplete not only allows us to witness the development of his substantive ideas on war, but also gives us an insight into how he approached his subject and employed new methodological tools to overcome apparent contradictions in his theory. Few military thinkers have approached the subject with such dedication, commitment, wide-ranging experience, or intellectual integrity, all combined with a strong desire to avoid 'an ostentatious exhibition of ideas'²⁸² as so often accompanies intellectual vanity. Clausewitz faced his theoretical problems almost with, what at times appears to be a slight sense of desperation, as if his life depended upon the successful resolution of some

²⁸¹ Strachan, 'Dialectics', p. 38.

²⁸² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 197.

nagging logical antinomy or contradiction between theory and reality. In some senses this was true. Late in his life Clausewitz grew increasingly aware that he would probably not achieve great distinction and lasting renown through command on the battlefield. And so he devoted his final years to the one area where perhaps he could achieve lasting influence: theory. In this, we may confidently state that he succeeded. As is suggested in the opening quote of this Chapter – ‘Not what we have argued but the manner in which we have argued may, we believe, benefit theory’ – even those who disagree with the substantive conclusions of his theory might at least recognise that Clausewitz set the standard in tackling a subject that has evaded the grasp of many a great mind.

CHAPTER THREE

Context and Circumstance

As water has no constant form there are in war no constant conditions¹

Sun Tzu

As location is the key to property values, so context is, or at least should be, the most important variable in understanding war.²

Colin Gray

A cursory glance through any number of military history books reveals that most authors feel compelled to say something, whether succinctly or at length, about the context within which a particular battle or war took place. The impulse to describe the broad setting in which events occurred is, it seems, an almost natural urge. Return to some of the earliest classical historians and this impulse is readily apparent. Thucydides begins his *History of the Peloponnesian War* with a penetrating account of the political situation that culminated in the conflict between Sparta and Athens and *The Pentecontaetia* provides a comprehensive outline of the events that enabled Athens to grow in strength after the Persian Wars prior to the conflict with Sparta. Xenophon represents the opposite of Thucydides in this respect. His *A History of My Times* opens with the sentence, ‘Some days later Thymochares arrived from Athens with a few ships, and the Spartans and Athenians immediately fought another naval action in which the Spartans, under the command of Agesandridas, were victorious.’³ Whether or not Xenophon believed he was writing a continuation of the *Peloponnesian War*⁴

¹ Quoted in Michael I. Handel, ‘Clausewitz in the Age of Technology’, in Michael I. Handel (ed.), *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 51.

² Colin Gray, ‘How Has War Changed Since the End of the Cold War?’, *Parameters*, Spring 2005, p. 14.

³ Xenophon, *A History of My Times*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 53. In Xenophon’s defence, he may have assumed that his work was simply a continuation of Thucydides’ history, so perhaps he felt there was no need to outline the context. This may also help explain the words, ‘Some days later...’.

⁴ Indeed, the *Peloponnesian War* ends with the unfinished sentence, ‘He went first to Ephesus where he made a sacrifice to Artemis...’ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans.

the effect is unsettling, like being lost on a mountain in the mist without map or compass. Or perhaps a parallel can be drawn with Sam Beckett in the television series *Quantum Leap* who, each episode, would be randomly thrown into a new situation at some time in the past without prior knowledge of where he would be going or why. Reading the first few pages of Xenophon perhaps evokes a reaction similar to that of Beckett after finding himself in a new situation at the beginning of each episode: 'Oh boy'!

Whilst perhaps none of the excitement and drama is lost in Xenophon's direct approach (indeed, this was precisely what gave *Quantum Leap* its dramatic appeal), meaning and explanation pay a heavy price. Xenophon assumes on the part of the reader considerable knowledge of the broad setting in which his history unfolds. As a result, newcomers feel compelled to study maps and consult other accounts to gain a bearing in relation to the text and better understand the events described.⁵ A parallel can be made here with the position of the commander in war. The Xenophons of military commanders are those who attempt to use force with little understanding of the environment in which they act, who are concerned only with the immediate problem of defeating the enemy, and who rarely look beyond the narrow confines of their immediate situation. The shortcomings are of a similar nature, only the consequences are of a profoundly different order: the one can be measured in numbers of dissatisfied or confused readers, the other in lives lost or political communities destroyed. However, these issues are more closely linked than may appear at first sight. Sound history can alert commanders to the fact that outcomes in war are crucially shaped by the wider conditions in which they take place. It is the task of theory to conceptualise this idea.

Michael Howard offers some initial clues regarding the importance of the concept of context in the introduction to his magisterial history of *The Franco-Prussian War*.⁶ It is worth quoting him at length:

Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 605. Although this may suggest an almost seamless transition between the two works, the time gap between them is greater than may be supposed.

⁵ The use of the example of Xenophon to emphasise the importance of context is purely illustrative and not intended as a direct rebuke of his historical writings.

⁶ Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. ix-x.

Like most neophyte historians...I expected to be able to explain the war's outcome through events on the battlefields themselves; the skill of the commanders, the nature of the armaments, the efficiency of the supply systems, the discipline and courage of the troops. But it rapidly became clear that these explanations were not in themselves enough...Gradually I came to realise...that the outcome of the war was 'the result not simply of faulty command but of a faulty military system; and the military system of a nation is not an independent section of the social system but an aspect of it in its totality'. So a study of the war, indeed of any war, had to be rooted in a study, not simply of the armies, but of the societies that fought it.⁷

Howard makes it clear that to understand and explain apparently isolated military events, we must comprehend how those events are connected to wider forces. An account of the former may suffice to *describe* the course of the war, but certainly not to *explain* it. Simply observing a particular event, and the elements that constitute it, is only a first step, albeit an important one, to understanding. The implication is that armies, weapons technology, and supply systems are as they are for a reason – they do not exist in a vacuum. They are all products of a certain age, an age with its own unique characteristics at a certain point in time and place. Given this connection, if we fail to inquire as to why things are as they are, then our understanding of events will be necessarily limited and parochial. The broader perspective will usually hold 'the key for a full understanding of the fighting.'⁸ This is a perspective embodied in the 'war and society'⁹ or 'New Military History' school which, as Geoffrey Wawro explains, 'does not skimp on technology, generalship or battles, but takes care to place war in its larger social, political, economic and cultural context.'¹⁰

These introductory points may come across as mere common sense, but it is surprising how often this crucial aspect of understanding war is overlooked or neglected, by historians, strategists, and theorists of war. Clausewitz pointed to this evasive inclination in a letter to a colleague with regard to the centrality of comprehending the political conditions of any war: 'That it is essential to see the

⁷ Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*.

⁸ Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993), p. 1.

⁹ Jeremy Black, *Introduction to Global Military History: 1775 to the present day* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 270-71.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Wawro, *Warfare and Society in Europe, 1792 – 1914* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. ix.

matter in this way, that the point of view is almost self-evident if we only keep the history of war in mind, scarcely needs proof. Nevertheless, it has not been fully accepted.’¹¹ Colin Gray has also noted that, ‘since, following Clausewitz, war cannot be approached as an autonomous activity, if it is considered bereft of context it becomes literally senseless.’¹² So, how are we to conceive of the concept of context, how and why does it contribute to our understanding of war, and what is the role of this concept in Clausewitz’s trinity? This chapter considers some of these questions and seeks to reveal the pivotal role it plays in Clausewitz’s theory of war. Context is a vital aspect in the framework of the trinity as it provides the ‘setting’ in which the three central primary tendencies are manifested in reality through secondary level subjects. In this respect, it can be conceived as a tertiary level in the theory, and which is intertwined and inseparable from the others. We therefore analyse this concept in detail before moving on to explore each of the separate tendencies in the following three chapters. The chapter begins by considering the various ways in which context is understood by Clausewitz. The following section considers the concept in greater detail and offers a clearer articulation of context as a central component of a trinitarian theory of war. The chapter concludes by outlining some of the prominent substantive dimensions of context by way of historical instantiation.

Clausewitz on context

How are we to understand the concept of context in relation to the trinity? Clausewitz engages with this concept in a number of ways and in relation to a variety of issues. These areas present us with differing routes into the subject and enable us to reveal how Clausewitz understood and employed the idea. This chapter demonstrates that context can be considered as a ‘hidden’ level of the trinity and is central to its meaning. There is certainly good evidence for this proposition within the few passages directly concerning the trinity, but a fuller understanding of its place in Clausewitz’s theory, and its precise meaning for him, has to be based upon an appreciation of his wider work.

¹¹ Carl von Clausewitz quoted in Paret, *Understanding*, p. 127.

¹² Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 56.

That context was an issue of great importance for Clausewitz is unmistakable if one explores, in detail, *On War* and his other writings. Indeed, as Gat asserts: ‘throughout his life...this view of war within the context of its particular social and political reality was fundamental to Clausewitz’s historical and theoretical outlook.’¹³ Aron also notes that Clausewitz ‘could not fail to discover or observe the diversity of wars according to their times’¹⁴ given his own personal experiences during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras, combined with his historical study of war.

In a general sense, the importance of conditions and circumstances are frequently expressed in relation to Clausewitz’s more practical military issues. When Clausewitz considers strategic and operational principles, the analysis is almost always accompanied by important accompanying caveats. These qualifying remarks – termed by Beyerchen as a ‘maddening maze of qualification’¹⁵ – amount to a recognition of the importance of unique conditions which allow for either the moderation, or even, abandonment of action according to given principles.¹⁶ As Clausewitz states, ‘Many roads lead to success and they do not all involve the opponent’s outright defeat...the choice depends on circumstances.’¹⁷ For instance, Clausewitz explains how a certain style of fighting derived from a successful experience fighting one war ‘can easily outlive the situation that gave rise to it; for conditions change imperceptibly.’¹⁸ This was a fact devastatingly revealed at Jena in 1806 when Frederick the Great’s ‘oblique order’¹⁹ proved wholly unsuited to battle against Napoleon: an

¹³ Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 218.

¹⁴ Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War*, trans. C. Booker and N. Stone (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985), p. 41.

¹⁵ Alan Beyerchen, ‘Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Unpredictability of War’, *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Winter, 1992, p. 84.

¹⁶ This is even the case in relation to the destruction of the enemy forces. He states that this is only more effective ‘if we can assume all other conditions are equal.’ ‘The advantage that the destruction of the enemy possesses over all other means is balanced by its cost and danger; and it is only in order to avoid these risks that other policies are employed.’ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. 111. The latter quote is interesting in relation to modern counterinsurgency campaigns, where the ‘cost and danger’ of attempting to destroy the enemy – perhaps for reasons somewhat different to those Clausewitz had in mind – may well outweigh alternative approaches. For that reason, ‘operations that have *direct political repercussions*’ are generally to be preferred. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

¹⁹ As famously displayed in his victory over the Austrian army under Charles of Lorraine at Leuthen in 1757.

example of ‘the most extreme poverty of the imagination to which routine has ever led.’²⁰ While such operational examples are important and such follies litter the history of war (popularly expressed in the aphorisms that generals are always fighting the last war or that nothing fails like success), this section will concentrate on the fundamental and philosophical grounds for Clausewitz’s belief in the centrality of context.

History and historicism

The clearest expression of the importance of contextual understanding is to be found in Clausewitz’s work which focuses on historical matters, both in *On War* and in his explicitly historical studies. We have already noted the importance of history in Clausewitz’s theoretical approach, but here we need to understand its crucial influence in developing his sensitivity towards contextual conditions. Clausewitz’s reading of Herder and Möser,²¹ and other writers of the Historicist school, taught him to value and appreciate the individuality of different epochs and historical cultures. It was an approach to the study of the history which had at its heart, the idea that past societies should be interpreted on their own terms, not simply as earlier inferior stages on the long march toward civilisation, as the dominant Enlightenment perspective had it. Historicism placed emphasis on striving to understand the conditions that shaped the culture, politics, and life of earlier societies.

The influence of the Historicist approach is clearly evident in Clausewitz’s writings. Perhaps the best example is to be found in his historical survey in Chapter 3B, Book 8. Clausewitz explains that ‘the Tartars...eighteenth century kings...all conducted war in their own particular way, using different methods and pursuing different aims.’²² After impressionistically reviewing the different periods, Clausewitz concludes by stating that, ‘We wanted to show how every age had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions... It follows that the events of every age *must be judged*

²⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 180.

²¹ Clausewitz read Möser’s *History of Osnabrück* at some point between his arrival in Berlin in 1801 and the War of 1806. Paret, *Understanding*, p. 137.

²² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 709.

in the light of its own peculiarities.'²³ These ideas had been apparent to Clausewitz in his early twenties, when writing about the Thirty Years War. Criticising scholars who saw those wars as nothing but formless and brutish struggles, Clausewitz emphasised that the men of the age 'acted in accordance with their economic and technological condition, their political and religious concerns, and their psychology.'²⁴ Essentially, Clausewitz is emphasising the relativistic point that generalisations with regard to how war is and should be fought will always be circumscribed in their universal application by the play of changing historical conditions.

Paret, in an essay considering Clausewitz's historical method, draws attention to these ideas. He describes how Clausewitz, in his efforts to understand the great changes wrought by the French Revolution, felt compelled 'to fit the Revolution into the larger processes of European history' because it could be 'accurately interpreted only if the conditions preceding it were taken in to account.'²⁵ Similarly, Clausewitz recognised that the military institutions of the *ancien régime* were rendered almost obsolete because their 'forms and means were no longer appropriate to the changed times and political conditions.'²⁶ In *On War*, Clausewitz explained that war underwent significant changes during his life because of the 'new political conditions which the French Revolution created...conditions that set in motion new means and new forces, and have thus made possible a degree of energy in war that otherwise would have been inconceivable.'²⁷ This sentiment is also expressed in Clausewitz's 'Observations of Prussia in Her Great Catastrophe', relating to the massive defeat and humiliation suffered by Prussia at Jena in 1806, in which he states that 'the machinery of government was desiccated, decrepit, and *entirely unsuited to the times*.'²⁸ Later in the same piece, Clausewitz returns to this theme: 'The French Revolution had lent a new character to European politics and to war, which Frederick the Great had not anticipated, as on the eve of great changes we

²³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 717. Emphasis added.

²⁴ Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 211.

²⁵ Paret, 'Introduction', in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 8.

²⁶ Clausewitz, 'On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst', in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 102.

²⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 737.

²⁸ Clausewitz, 'Observations on Prussia in Her Great Catastrophe', in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 41. Emphasis added.

seldom can predict the direction matters will take.’²⁹ These examples reveal the extent to which Clausewitz always strove to explain events – both historical and contemporary – in relation to prevailing conditions, as opposed to judging them according to some universal standard; a fault Clausewitz recognised in alternative approaches to history, in particular those with a teleological bent.

The dangers of the teleological approach

In his analysis of Prussia’s defeat in 1806, Clausewitz points to a certain mentality that pervaded elite Prussian society at the time, which viewed history in teleological terms and that conceived of Prussia as having reached a ‘level of civilisation at which the strength of the people was completely excluded from public affairs’ – if this was the case in Prussia, as this contemporary popular line of reasoning went, so too must it be the case elsewhere. For Clausewitz, this ethnocentric Prussian mentality led to a failure to comprehend or accept the changed conditions of European politics wrought by the Revolution and its resultant impact on war. In historical and philosophical terms, Clausewitz rejected such dangerous universalising illusions. There is also a clear strategic point here: that those who fail to perceive and adapt to changed circumstances are more likely to face defeat in war.

Paret notes how Clausewitz criticised other writers for their teleological view of history. He states that, ‘History in the service of a philosophic worldview as Hegel encapsulated it, for instance, would not serve Clausewitz’s purpose.’³⁰ Hegel’s philosophy is a good instance of the radically contrasting approaches to history that exist, and underlines the extent to which Clausewitz’s historicism and objectivity are by no means default positions (both then and still today). Hegel, in his lectures on *The Philosophy of History*, seeks to reveal that history is essentially comprised of a rational process; the gradual unveiling of Reason or Spirit as Freedom, and which had supposedly reached its apotheosis in the Prussian state of his times.³¹ History, is presented as an impersonal process that essentially rejects what is not pertinent to its underlying *telos*, leaving only

²⁹ Clausewitz, ‘Observations on Prussia in Her Great Catastrophe’, p. 76.

³⁰ Paret, *Understanding*, p. 132.

³¹ Georg Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004).

that which correlates to reason as 'Actual'. Even dominant western perspectives today contain a large amount of an almost unconscious teleology, based as they are on broad Enlightenment ideals of progress and perfectibility. A modern critic of this view of history is John Gray who has attacked both active (those who seek to accelerate progress) and passive (those that simply believe such progress exists) proponents of this belief in an 'ultimate convergence in history.'³²

A very similar view – almost the military theoretical manifestation of Hegel – is apparent in the work of Clausewitz's contemporary, Jomini. He considered all earlier periods as merely preparatory to the present; a present which had revealed permanently valid principles of war – 'fixed laws resembling those of the positive sciences'³³ – as embodied in the campaigns of Napoleon (mirroring Hegel's eulogy to the Prussian state) and can be summarised as: 'to throw by strategic movements the mass of an army, successively, upon the decisive points of a theatre of war.'³⁴ Clausewitz rejected this view because he believed that such principles were 'dependent on the circumstances of the time...which might not recur under altered conditions.'³⁵ Jomini passionately believed, as John Shy has put it, that a 'reality lies beneath the superficial chaos of the historical moment in enduring and invariable principles, like those of gravitation and probability.'³⁶ His principles of the 'decisive point' and 'interior lines' were the correlative of the Hegelian 'Actuality' embodied in the unfurling spirit of freedom.

This belief would compel Jomini to attempt to discover military principles that were not dependent on contextual considerations, or at least only in the parochial sense of adapting otherwise extremely rigid principles to different circumstances.³⁷ This conception of the impact of conditions is far

³² John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 196.

³³ Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Texas: El Paso Norte Press, 2005), p. 258.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³⁵ Paret, *Understanding*, p. 137.

³⁶ John Shy, 'Jomini', in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 148.

³⁷ 'Under such and such circumstances, according to Jomini, one should attack in such and such a formation, taking care that such and such points should be occupied and that such and such conditions should be met.' Martin van Creveld, 'The Eternal Clausewitz' in Handel, *Modern Strategy*, p. 45. 'Various combinations of lines were possible – concentric, eccentric, interior, exterior – according to the circumstances.' Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), p. 33.

removed from the fundamental and comprehensive use of the term by Clausewitz. In a manner typical of most teleological approaches, Jomini judged past wars (such as Frederick's campaigns) on the unhistorical basis of principles that had been revealed, and which he believed he had identified, in their correct and universal form through the campaigns of Napoleon in the present.³⁸ This led to a somewhat perverse formula when analysing past campaigns which essentially judged them according to how closely they adhered to the Napoleonic ideal, and might be crudely reduced to, 'this is how Napoleon would have done it.' Even if he recognised differences in the character of warfare and that 'the specific application of principles would vary,'³⁹ this did not prevent him from judging different periods – 'from Scipio and Caesar to Napoleon'⁴⁰ – according to one standard derived from the present and reflected back into the past. Past defeats could be explained by a failure to adhere to the principles he had revealed, regardless of differing conditions: '*Le système de L'Empereur Napoléon présente une application constante de ces principes invariable.*'⁴¹ Clausewitz explicitly criticises such approaches when he states that, 'Whoever relies purely on the perspective of his own times is inclined to treat what is most recent as best – and he finds it impossible to deal with what is exceptional or out of the ordinary.'⁴²

This brief examination of Jomini in opposition to Clausewitz clearly reveals that the study or use of history does not automatically entail an

³⁸ For example, Shy explains how, in his *Treatise on Major Military Operations of the Seven Years War*, Jomini could cite 'the 'immortal campaign of the Emperor Napoleon in 1809' as positive proof that it might have been done in 1756 and that Napoleon was a better strategist than Frederick.' In this way, Jomini denies the unique context within which Frederick fought and that shaped his strategic choices. Shy, 'Jomini', p. 151. Contrary to such a view, in a letter written at the end of 1827, Clausewitz noted that conditions were not mere trivialities but 'the most important issues'. For instance, he noted how 'Bonaparte and Frederick the Great are often compared, sometimes without keeping in mind that one man ruled over 40 million subjects, the other 5.' For this reason, and others, they simply cannot be judged according to the same standard. Clausewitz quoted in Paret, *Understanding*, p. 127.

³⁹ As Shy notes Jomini did not conflate 'the campaigns of Frederick and Napoleon into an undifferentiated art of war'. Shy, 'Jomini', p. 154.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 124.

⁴¹ Quoted in Shy, 'Jomini', p. 152.

⁴² Quoted in Hew Strachan, 'Clausewitz and the Dialectics of War', in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 39. Paret notes how Clausewitz rejected 'the view, propounded by Jomini and others, and widely accepted at the time, that in his wars Frederick the Great acted whenever possible according to strategic principles that subsequently were fully implemented by Napoleon in a military environment that had changed little between the 1740s and 1815.' Paret, *Understanding*, pp. 150-51.

appreciation or acceptance of the importance of context. In Jomini's case, the past essentially represented a handy store of examples that could be used to prove his principles derived from the present. History was not to be understood in its own terms, but in relation to the principles he had uncovered. Under Jomini's hand, theory would shape history, rather than history shaping theory. Clausewitz, in opposition to Jomini, held to the latter approach and thus developed a theory that was more sympathetic to the importance of historical conditions and that, somewhat paradoxically, would be more universally relevant than Jomini's supposedly 'scientific' system.

This distinction can be more clearly discerned if we compare two statements by Jomini and Clausewitz. In the conclusion of his *The Art of War* Jomini states that 'we will apply this great principle [massed force at the decisive point] to the different cases of strategy and tactics, and then show, by the history of twenty celebrated campaigns, that with few exceptions, the most brilliant successes and the greatest reverses resulted from an adherence to this principle in the one case, and from a neglect of it in the other.'⁴³ Contrast this with Clausewitz's firmly historically inductive approach when he states that, 'theoretical results must have been derived from history or at least checked against it... A great advantage offered by this method is that theory will have to remain realistic. It cannot allow itself to get lost in futile speculation, hairsplitting, and flights of fancy.'⁴⁴ As Gat has made clear, Clausewitz rejected Jomini's approach because it 'ignored the living reality of war...and the unique conditions of each particular case.'⁴⁵

That the Jominian approach to the history of war is not without its more modern equivalents is revealed in Liddell Hart's *Strategy*.⁴⁶ In a fashion similar to that of Jomini, Liddell Hart – inspired by a moral indignation towards the form of 'total war' witnessed in World War I and relying on the eighteenth century precedent, as opposed to Jomini's exemplification of the Napoleonic form –

⁴³ Jomini, *Summary*, p. 56.

⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 166.

⁴⁵ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 125. Likewise, Strachan notes that, 'The development of war cannot be understood, as Jomini attempted to understand Napoleon, simply as a continuous, independent, self-generating growth, unaffected by external phenomena.' Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Kings Lynn: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.

⁴⁶ Basil Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Meridian, 1991).

prescribed operations on the line of 'least expectation.'⁴⁷ As Gat notes, his search for the universal principle of the indirect approach as the basis of all decisive successes 'was marred by his unhistorical and naïve disregard for the particular conditions...which had shaped each period's way of doing things.'⁴⁸ Strachan notes that of course, 'the line of least expectation may in fact be that of supposed greatest expectation.'⁴⁹ Again, deductive theory was allowed to lead inductive and critical historical analysis, perverting historical truth for its own ends.⁵⁰

Context in theory and historical method

Despite, in the previous chapter, having discussed Clausewitz's approach to theory and history it is worth exploring these ideas further, because contained in relevant sections of *On War* are valuable clues with respect to the importance he attached to context. For instance, in his chapter on 'Method and Routine', Clausewitz rejects the notion of scientific 'laws' being applicable to war 'since no prescriptive formulation universal enough to deserve the name of law can be applied to the constant change and diversity of the phenomena.'⁵¹ Indeed, it is this fundamental idea that explains many of the arguments Clausewitz puts forward with regard to the utility, limits, and purpose of theory. For example, he explains that earlier efforts to produce a positive theory of war resulted from a 'failure to take adequate account of the endless complexities involved.'⁵² Theory cannot aim to become a commander's manual for action' intended 'to serve as a guide which at the moment of action lays down precisely the path he must take'⁵³ because each situation presents different circumstances; due to changing contexts, all theory can hope to provide is a form of intellectual foundation, 'not a model for the art of war.'⁵⁴ If differing conditions throw up different strategic

⁴⁷ Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, p. 327.

⁴⁸ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 682.

⁴⁹ Strachan, *European Armies*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Strachan proposes that such 'systematisers' adopt such an approach to war because 'they find difficulty in accepting the elemental forces at its centre.' Moreover, they are guilty of 'the selective use of facts to buttress preconceptions.' Strachan, *European Armies*, p. 3 and 6.

⁵¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 176.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

imperatives then theory, to remain relevant, must be capable of accommodating this.

In his chapter on ‘Historical Examples’ we gain a further indication of the centrality of context in his approach to theory. The relevant section concerns the issue of using historical examples as proof for a certain theoretical proposition or general truth.⁵⁵ Clausewitz notes how some people believe that in using historical examples to demonstrate a proposition they can substitute quantity for detail: ‘instead of presenting a fully detailed case, critics are content merely to *touch on* three or four, which give the *semblance* of strong proof.’⁵⁶ This, in his view, is a dangerous method as he argues that ‘an event that is lightly touched on...is like an object seen at great distance...it looks the same from every angle’⁵⁷ and thus cannot offer conclusive proof. For this reason, a single thoroughly detailed event is to be preferred over a number of limited cases. This was a conclusion he had reached as early as 1812 when, in his written advice to the Crown Prince he advised that, ‘The detailed study of a few individual engagements is more useful than the general knowledge of a great many campaigns.’⁵⁸ The reasoning behind these assertions is revealed when he explains why examples drawn from recent history will be more reliable and susceptible to considered analysis.

The problem for Clausewitz is essentially one of context and relates to an issue touched upon in the introduction to this chapter. Clausewitz states that, ‘not only were conditions different in more distant times...but military history is bound with the passage of time to lose a mass of minor elements and details...It loses some element of life and colour, like a picture that gradually fades and darkens.’⁵⁹ He goes on to explain that the study of more recent history is to be preferred because ‘the conditions of modern warfare...bear a considerable resemblance to those of the present day...The further back one goes, the less useful history becomes, growing poorer and barer at the same time.’⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 200-01.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁵⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, *The Principles of War*, trans. and ed. Hans W. Gatzke (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 68.

⁵⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 203.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Clausewitz's comments are not to be understood as placing the lessons of modern history over and above ancient history in an objective sense: all periods and wars are *intrinsically* equally valuable to the formulation of a general theory of war, just not to the individual theorist who is inevitably timebound. His concern relates to the fact that the determining conditions of the age under study will – by virtue of the lack of available evidence and the theorist's poor understanding of very different times – be improperly grasped and, therefore, establishing critical proofs as to cause and effect, making judgements on the correct use of means (explained at greater length in the preceding chapter of *On War*), and extracting insights of timeless relevance will be imperfect and next to impossible. The critical historian of ancient warfare is largely presumed to be 'in no position to evaluate the relevant events correctly, nor to apply them to the wholly different means we use today.'⁶¹ A similar concern explains Clausewitz's criticism of Machiavelli's writings on war, which he details in an 1809 letter to the philosopher Fichte: 'the art of war of the ancients attracted him too much, not only its spirit, but also in all of its forms.'⁶²

It is this line of argument that helps explain, and essentially reject, a criticism that has often been directed at Clausewitz. This view has it that Clausewitz is over-reliant on historical examples drawn only from, what was for him, the relatively recent past, and in particular from the Napoleonic period. This, it is argued, explains why Clausewitz's insights are of only historical value; the explanative power of *On War* is largely confined to the period from which most of its ideas are drawn. First, such a claim downplays the extent of Clausewitz's broad historical knowledge. Second, the above points reveal that

⁶¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 204.

⁶² Carl von Clausewitz, 'Letter to Fichte', in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 281. It would be unfair however, to state that Machiavelli did not at least understand the potential pitfalls of over-reliance on ancient practice. In the Preface to Book II of *The Discourses*, Machiavelli explains that it is perhaps dangerous because, 'The whole truth about olden times is not grasped' and he realises that he may be amongst those 'who deceive themselves if in these my discourses I have praised too much the days of the ancient Romans.' Machiavelli, Niccolò, *The Discourses*, trans. Leslie J. Walker (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 265 and 268. Nevertheless, Felix Gilbert notes that, for Machiavelli, 'To a large extent his true principles of military warfare are attempts to show on the basis of ancient sources how the Romans conducted war.' Felix Gilbert, 'Machiavelli' in Peter Paret, *Makers of Modern Strategy*, p. 22. Clausewitz deployed a similar criticism of General von Phull in his study of the 1812 Campaign, whom he describes as being so attached to works by Julius Caesar and Frederick the Great that he 'occupied himself almost exclusively in fruitlessly reflecting on their military ideas, without the slightest historical perspective.' Carl von Clausewitz, 'The Campaign of 1812 in Russia', in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 115.

the decision by Clausewitz to derive most of his general propositions from recent experience was both conscious and to some extent forced upon him, but forced only in the sense of someone who has thought hard about the alternatives and determined that there is only one credible way forward. Due to Clausewitz's conviction that meaningful conclusions can only be established based on a deep understanding of prevailing conditions, he was not willing to succumb to 'vanity and quackery'⁶³ in order to provide a cover of respectability – 'sheer decoration'⁶⁴ – to propositions that would almost inevitably lack inner-validity and truth.

Context and the trinity

And so we return to the trinity. We have seen the numerous ways in which Clausewitz places great emphasis on the role of context, in particular with regard to its role in historical analysis and the development of theory. These points alone should be sufficient to confirm the centrality of understanding contextual conditions in Clausewitz's theory, but how do these ideas find their final expression in the trinity; the apotheosis of Clausewitz's work. It would be somewhat odd if, after emphasising such issues in his wider work, Clausewitz did not incorporate them, in some shape or form, in the trinity.

The answer is that context *is* expressed in the trinity, but in a manner that does not sufficiently convey the theoretical weight behind the concept. In fact, when the meaning is grasped, it becomes clear that the issue of context is presented in the very first line of the trinity: Clausewitz states that 'war is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case.'⁶⁵ This sentence could be mistaken for a throw-away comment or handy metaphor, but it in fact embodies much of what has been explained above and helps us comprehend the connection of context to the other aspects of the trinity. Clausewitz was a master of metaphor and few were included that failed to convey true meaning.⁶⁶ Contrary to popular belief, chameleons do not change

⁶³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 204.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁶⁶ Clausewitz's use of metaphor is discussed in Alan Beyerchen's article, 'Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery'. Available online at:

colour according to their surroundings, but rather do so as a result of their physiological condition; it is an expression of changes in mood or temperature. Yet it is clear that Clausewitz has in mind the popular conception of a chameleon's ability to blend with its surroundings. So what does this apt, if scientifically inaccurate, analogy tell us?

In comparing war to a chameleon Clausewitz is suggesting that war's outer appearance – its character, the 'face of war' – is in constant flux, even though its inner nature remains unchanged. That intrinsic nature relates to the three primary tendencies of the trinity. In this respect, war is 'more than' a chameleon because he goes on to explain how the three tendencies will constantly change in their relationship to one another. Bassford has pointed to this aspect of the analogy when he notes that 'this metaphor, while pretty good as far as it goes, is still insufficient, because war also changes in deeper ways (i.e. its nature) according to the circumstances of each real-world case.'⁶⁷ Here, the scientifically correct chameleon would perhaps be a more appropriate analogy. Bassford's excellent translation of the original text expresses this idea more clearly: 'war is thus more than a mere chameleon, because it changes its nature to some extent in each concrete case.'⁶⁸ Nevertheless, taken together the three tendencies represent permanent (yet modulating) features of war. The appearance of the chameleon's skin at any one time represents war in the 'particular case.'⁶⁹ This relates to the character of war at a given moment. Its character (colour) may have changed but it is still by nature, war (or in the chameleon's case, a member of the family *chamaeleonidae*) comprised of policy, chance, and passion.

The change in character – and this is the central point – results from a change in the environment in which the chameleon finds itself. Its surroundings exist outside and beyond itself, beyond its control. Furthermore, if we make the assumption that the chameleon changes its colour to survive by camouflaging itself from potential prey, then this may also be applied to war in the sense that

<<http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Beyerchen/BeyerschenNonlinearity2.pdf>>, retrieved 20 April 2007.

⁶⁷ Christopher Bassford, 'The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's Mature Thought', in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz*, p. 78.

⁶⁸ Bassford, 'The Primacy of Policy', p. 77.

⁶⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham and ed. F. N. Maude (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 121.

war can only be an effective instrument if those using force take into account the circumstances in which it is employed.⁷⁰ But this potentially important strategic point is not our main concern. Clausewitz is making the non-prescriptive, objective observation that the character of war will always be shaped by the general context in which it takes place – the chameleon changes its colour, but it does so more or less involuntarily as a result of its environment. Even chameleons that fail to change colour appropriately cannot help but be products of their environment and they have no choice but to act in the context in which they find themselves (yet, again, they may be more vulnerable). Just as the surroundings of the ‘popular’ chameleon will be in constant flux due to changes in the seasons, weather, or the terrain it finds itself in, so too is the context within which war takes place constantly changing. War, in the concrete case, will reflect the unique context that is in evidence at a particular time.

Yet, war is certainly ‘more than’ a chameleon in another sense. The analogy does not properly convey the complex, interdependent relationship between, on the one hand, war and those engaged in war, and on the other, the context within which they wage war. As Clausewitz was aware, there is a continual, mutual, and reciprocal relationship between the two. The popularly conceived chameleon simply reacts to its surroundings and adapts accordingly, but this is not the case with the social phenomenon of war. The context is, to a great extent, formed (however unwittingly) by the actions of individuals and groups, and they then act within that context.

Clausewitz’s analogy of a chameleon is the clearest expression of the concept of context in the trinity. As such, it embodies a whole range of insights – outlined above – which are to be found throughout Clausewitz’s works. The importance that context played in Clausewitz’s theory of war as contained in the trinity, is neatly summarised by Paret when he states that the elements of war (the three tendencies) are ‘not compromised or distorted by being placed in a particular historical context, the context allows us to see their essential nature as they act and react in a dynamic state rather than as abstractions.’⁷¹ To conclude

⁷⁰ This observation reflects an important idea presented by Clausewitz in the preceding section of the chapter in which he states: ‘the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 100.

⁷¹ Paret, *Understanding*, p. 23.

this section, we should return to the final passage of Clausewitz's historical survey in Book 8, Chapter 3B. The passage is essentially a concise expression of Clausewitz's broad theoretical framework (as embodied in the trinity) and thus enables us to clearly determine the place context assumes in it. Clausewitz states that:

The aims a belligerent adopts, and the resources he employs, must be governed by the particular characteristics of his own position [the secondary level]; *but they will also conform to the spirit of the age and to its general character* [the context]. Finally, they must always be governed by the general conclusions to be drawn from the nature of war itself [the primary trinity].⁷²

There is thus considerable evidence of Clausewitz's reliance on the broad notion of context – often described by him as 'conditions' – in relation to war. Furthermore, it is employed in some of the most important sections of his work. Its presence in the trinity as a partially hidden, yet central theoretical device has also been demonstrated. However, if we are to reaffirm the place of context in our interpretation of the trinity, this concept requires more in-depth analysis. Proceeding from this solid Clausewitzian base, we can consider this idea in relation to recent scholarship on the issue, in the light of historical experience, and through an analytical exploration of the concept.

Explorations

Clausewitz certainly takes us quite far in understanding the concept of context, and principally by stressing its importance, but a closer consideration reveals a number of potential problems with this idea. Context, no matter how commonsensical its inclusion as a vital aspect of a theory of war may appear, is by no means a simple idea, nor is it easy to deduce its main outlines in theory. In fact, the idea of context is so diffuse and wide-ranging that fixing on any one simple definition or description of its central components is extremely difficult. Therefore, the best way to approach the subject is to probe the concept from a number of angles, by asking different questions of it, and considering its

⁷² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 718.

boundaries with other concepts. By exploring the concept in this way we will be able to develop a more rigorous understanding of context and one that goes beyond a simple recognition of the fact that it is important.

Much of the best modern scholarship – historical, strategic, and theoretical – on war stresses the importance of context in a manner reminiscent of Clausewitz and, indeed, often in conscious emulation of him. We have already noted acclaimed historian, Michael Howard's recognition of and scholarly adherence to the importance of wide contextual knowledge in explaining military events. Colin Gray, a leading strategic theorist and self-confessed Clausewitzian, has described context as 'the most important variable in understanding war.'⁷³ In his book *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare*, he asserts that the only way to plausibly discuss future warfare is to embed the analysis in war's multiple contexts. Indeed, this is a unifying theme in his numerous publications on strategy.⁷⁴ In Rupert Smith's important book, *The Utility of Force*, his more overtly contemporary and pedagogical thesis is built entirely around the idea of contextual change and the work constantly stresses this point.⁷⁵ That modern wars are fought predominantly 'amongst the people' in contrast to those of the era of industrial war, is a proposition based on the notion of fundamentally changed conditions in a number of key respects. Lawrence Freedman's thesis outlined in his Adelphi Paper on *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* is similarly dependent on the impact changes in context – principally in political conditions – have on strategic choices in the modern world.⁷⁶

The usual practice is to acknowledge the importance of context and perhaps outline its most important dimensions (be they social, technological, economic, and so on). This is to be welcomed, and undoubtedly the substantive content of the work of these thinkers is heavily suffused with contextual

⁷³ Colin S. Gray, 'How Has War Changed Since the End of the Cold War?', *Parameters*, Spring, 2005, p. 14.

⁷⁴ See for instance: Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); *Strategy and History: Essays on theory and practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006); *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); and *War, Peace, and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

⁷⁵ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2005).

⁷⁶ Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379 (London: Routledge, 2006).

knowledge, which only serves to enhance the integrity and worth of their analyses. Nevertheless, there is a hidden assumption that we understand just what context is. Perhaps it is necessary to analyse the concept itself (as opposed to its substantive manifestations) in greater detail. As with any analytical concept, we need to understand where it begins and ends in relation to other concepts. The concept of context is particularly demanding of such definitional analysis, because it has become a greatly overused term which has consequently been drained of some of its meaning and explanative power. This section thus seeks to explore the concept by examining it through a number of central problematical areas.

Gray's discussion of strategic culture in his *Modern Strategy* offers us a useful starting point in thinking about definitions of context. Gray notes a dualism in definitions of context: 'context can be considered as something 'out there', typically in concentric circles, meaning 'that which surrounds'. Alternatively...one can approach context as that which weaves together' (from the Latin *contextere*, 'to weave together').⁷⁷ The first perspective certainly corresponds to typical conceptions of context. The dictionary defines context as 'the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea' and suggests, amongst others, 'conditions', 'background' and 'scene' as close synonyms.⁷⁸ The second of Gray's perspectives is less common but, as explored below, is central to a proper understanding of the term.

The first perspective, of context as that which surrounds, logically entails that the concept only becomes truly meaningful when used in relation to a particular 'something' (be it, as the dictionary definition notes, 'event, statement or idea'). Understanding the substantive content or form of context only becomes possible when conceived in relation to a particular situation or thing. We can ask the philosophical question 'what is context?', however, one cannot plausibly ask in isolation, 'what is the context?' without clarifying what it is we want to know the context of. Thus, the first basic point to note is that context only has *substantive* meaning or existence in relation to a particular subject or 'thing'.

⁷⁷ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 130.

⁷⁸ Catherine Soanes (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary, Thesaurus, and Wordpower Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 257.

Whilst this must be accepted, context is, to a certain extent, always ‘out there’ in the sense that it represents the permanent (yet constantly morphing) setting in which events are played out. So, rather than the notion that context requires a subject, this perspective holds that subjects can never escape context. The concept as a tool for understanding war is thus universally valid: all wars take place in context. The factors or dimensions that come to be described as the context of a particular event are permanently extant. Those dimensions only truly become ‘the context’ of something when that something happens. Just as a stage exists independently of the players that act upon it, that stage has little meaning until the play begins. To describe context as including a vague realm existing independently from any particular event certainly puts strain on the concept defined simply as ‘that which surrounds’: is it useful to call a stage a stage unless someone intends to act upon it? Yet, despite these definitional problems, it is difficult to conceive of context without this broader somewhat more ethereal perspective, without an appreciation of its existence independent from the immediate event.

Consider geographical context for instance. When a war takes place in a particular territory, the features which make up that territory represent aspects of that war’s geographical context. Take away the war and those same features can no longer plausibly be described as context, but they exist nevertheless – from one perspective, they are *context waiting to happen*. Whilst certain social trends, topographical features, cultural norms, climatic conditions and so on, exist independent of particular events, can be analysed in their own right, and are only properly termed context when used in relation to a particular event, it is vital to understand that such dimensions are the stuff of which context is made. These fairly common-sense observations are further clarified if we consider another distinction inherent in the concept: that between context and circumstance.

Context versus circumstance

It will be recalled that the dictionary definition used the term ‘circumstances’ in its description of context. Whilst this is by no means entirely wrong, we must tread carefully. The two terms, often used interchangeably, are strongly and intimately linked, however, a more rigorous analysis reveals that in fact they

constitute subtly different concepts that describe different things. If, as noted, there is something of a distance between the context and its subject, then the concept of circumstance is perhaps a useful mediating device. Circumstance is best understood as the aspect of context closest to the event being described and actors involved. As with context, but in a more definite sense, it only has substantive meaning in relation to the specific subject: it still constitutes an element of ‘that which surrounds’, but, if we adopt the idea of context visualised as concentric circles, then circumstance would perhaps equate to the first or inner circle. Circumstance is more immediate and close; context is more long-term, deeper, and detached. In this sense, circumstance takes up some of the strain we noted in the definition of context. Circumstance is essentially the immediate expression or manifestation of context. From the viewpoint of the immediate event at a certain point in time, context essentially *becomes* circumstance and it is difficult to see how the two can be clearly distinguished. Particular actors have to act in certain given circumstances presented by the situation in which they find themselves. Those circumstances were in turn determined by and dependent on prevailing contextual conditions, which exist prior to and beyond them.

Context and time – change and continuity

How does context relate to time and the idea of change over time? When we consider different dimensions of context in more detail below, one point becomes clear: that the various substantive dimensions seem to display to the observer different levels of change and permanency over time. As noted, context, as an operative concept in the theory of war, is permanent: no actor exists outside of a context. Yet context in its substantive form has the potential for endless change over time. Consequently, this change is reflected in the different circumstances actors find themselves in throughout history and, indeed, in the character of their own institutions, beliefs, or available technologies.⁷⁹ Context – in terms of its

⁷⁹ ‘War is to be found throughout all history and all civilizations. With axes or cannon, arrows or bullets, chemical explosives or atomic chain reactions, remote or immediate, in isolation or en masse, by accident or according to rigorous method, men have killed each other, using the instruments which custom and the communities’ knowledge has afforded them.’ Raymond Aron, *Peace and War* (New Jersey: Transaction, 2003), p. 150.

individual dimensions – can be conceived of on a spectrum allowing for extremely gradual change over time (such as geography or certain aspects of culture) to rapid or sudden change (such as technological advances or significant changes in structures of political power brought about, for instance, by revolution). As a holistic concept context never displays complete stasis: there is constant change in some of its dimensions regardless of how gradual they may be. The idea of *change* is thus inherent in the concept.

Related to this idea, there is an analytical problem here of distinguishing or making judgements on the speed or rate of contextual change. Which aspects of contextual change we emphasise *depends on what we are attempting to explain*. In a variation on the bureaucratic axiom that ‘where you stand depends on where you sit’, how we evaluate a particular contextual dimension (and the level of change displayed) depends on what it is we are attempting to explain or understand. It is this issue which makes abstract discussion of context so difficult. Judgements on the extent, rate, and form of contextual change are invariably relative and subjective.

A useful exercise in relation to the issue of context and time is to consider the conditions of war in prehistory, before the coming of agriculture about 10,000 years ago. There is considerable evidence that early hunter-gathers engaged in rudimentary forms of warfare.⁸⁰ It is interesting to speculate as to the rate of contextual change during this period. For thousands of years wars were fought only on land – evidence of the first ships only appears in the seventh millennium BC and ‘specialised warships, even ships suitable for war, are relatively recent in origin.’⁸¹ Extremely rudimentary weapons, limitations on language, and the absence of writing would have restricted the extent of social and cultural contextual change. However, this is not to deny that there was significant change in this period – as historians, we must be careful not to judge the pace of change purely against modern standards and ‘adopt a conception of time that is anachronistic when applied to the past.’⁸² Nor should the idea of contextual continuity lead us to presume that individual wars in such conditions would not raise entirely new problems requiring great talent, skill, and audacity

⁸⁰ Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 35.

⁸¹ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Pimlico, 2004), pp. 63-64.

⁸² Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaild, *Studying History* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 16.

to overcome. Recognition of relative levels of change or continuity in context is not to necessarily pronounce on the comparative difficulty or ease of strategy – that is largely dependent on factors peculiar and inherent to any particular war. All that can be said is that more stable conditions allow protagonists to become better acquainted with their environment, their opponents, and themselves – this may help them understand better what effect certain methods and actions can be expected to have. Still, even marginally different circumstances in the concrete case, varying objectives, the constraints imposed by available resources, or the unpredictable choices of the opponent can render irrelevant what comfort stable contexts may provide.

Recognition of significant contextual change in relation to war is a subject strongly associated with the study of so-called ‘military revolutions.’⁸³ Historians have identified what they perceive to be major changes in the character and conduct of war resulting from or influenced by transformations, ‘earthquakes’, or systemic changes in politics, society, technology, and administration.⁸⁴ The debates that surround exactly when, where, and why such revolutions have taken place is not our principal concern here, but this idea sheds light on the nature and potential impact of context in relation to war. One of the most important and far-reaching military revolutions accompanied the formation of centralised nation-states in the early modern period, roughly dated to the period between 1500 and 1800. The financial burdens of war resulting from new technologies (such as gunpowder weapons, elaborate fortifications, and gunned ships) meant only centralised states with bureaucratic machineries and sophisticated money markets could generate the economic wealth through taxation and deficit financing to maintain, and the socio-political infrastructures to organise, effective armed forces.⁸⁵ Wealth and resource extraction thus became a prerequisite of power, whilst wealth became increasingly dependent on military effectiveness in wars that supported mercantilist trading empires.⁸⁶ This period also saw the gradual emergence of recognisably modern, regular,

⁸³ See Williamson Murray and MacGregor Knox, *Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300-2050* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and Williamson Murray, ‘Thinking About Revolutions in Military Affairs’, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Summer 1997, pp. 69-76.

⁸⁴ Murray and Knox, *Military Revolution*, pp. 6-7.

⁸⁵ Gat, *War in Human Civilisation*, pp. 484-89.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 472 and 489-96. The point is also made by Howard in *War in European History*, p. 48.

professional, larger⁸⁷ armies – from the Spanish *tercios*, through Gustavus Adolphus's Swedish national army, to Louis XIV's remarkable royal army⁸⁸ – which replaced the localised feudal levies of the middle ages and the unpredictable *condottieri* companies of the Renaissance.⁸⁹ Princely power was consolidated, medieval 'private war' declined, and the modern state with its own professional standing armed forces, dedicated to the pursuit and protection of its national interest, took shape. The path to the absolutist, national, and 'total' wars of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries lay open.

Of course, although he didn't express it in such terms, Clausewitz essentially believed he had lived through and witnessed a profound military revolution, sparked by the enormous social and political upheavals associated with the French Revolution. Few today would disagree with the basis of his observation.

Context: weaving together

An important point that might not be clear in what has been written thus far is that context should not be seen as wholly external to the actors in war. The concept runs through and within the social entities under observation. A crucial aspect of context relates to a given actors own position: its form, character, norms, culture, ideology, as well as those of its opponents, allies, and other relevant groups. Context should not be conceived as a wholly exogenous concept. It will be recalled that Clausewitz employed the analogy of the chameleon in conveying the idea of how context impacts on war in the trinity and it was briefly noted that this was a useful yet insufficient metaphor; the limitation perhaps implied by Clausewitz's qualifier 'more than.' Likewise, the analysis presented so far suffers from a crucial weakness.

Whilst it is right to treat context as something that surrounds war (its actors and the course of events), this might convey the impression that context is something that exists as an entirely independent realm, like an omniscient and

⁸⁷ Although as Gat notes, armies did not radically increase in size if considered relative to the simultaneous growth of populations. Mobilisation levels remained at around the historical norm of 1 per cent of the population. Gat, *War in Human Civilisation*, pp. 474-76 and 504.

⁸⁸ See Howard, *War in European History*, pp. 32-34, 57-60, and 63-66.

⁸⁹ Ibid., *The Wars of the Mercenaries*, pp. 20-37.

omnipotent God directing the universe, and in which human actions and events thus simply follow a preordained pattern. In fact, context is more analogous to the Homeric Greek pantheon, composed of many varying dimensions, extremely capricious, and intimately and reciprocally wound up with human affairs. If we are to develop a more robust conception of context then we must understand the ways in which context not only surrounds, but as Gray stresses, ‘weaves together.’⁹⁰

The basic point here is that humans and the societies, nations, and institutions of which they are part, constitute an important aspect of the conditions of war. War is a social and political activity, and thus conditions relating to societies, political institutions, and cultural forms represent some of the most important factors impinging on the conduct of war, and of course, these things cannot be conceived of independent from the humans that comprise them. It is in this way that the trends and forms of human social conduct produce and reproduce the changing contexts within which the same actors conduct their wars. The relationship between war’s context and warfare itself is thus one of reciprocal and dynamic interaction over time. Due to this interaction, there is an extent to which, in some cases, powerful actors are able to shape their own contexts to varying degrees.

The totalitarian states of the twentieth century had an unprecedented capacity to manipulate and mould their societies according to their own ideological prescriptions. Through sheer force, indoctrination, and mass social programming (as so evocatively depicted in such dystopian novels as Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Zemyatin’s *We*, or Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty Four*)⁹¹ state actors can radically reshape their own social, political, and cultural conditions. For instance, the Holocaust was Hitler’s attempt to change the social fact of the existence of Jews in Europe. These represent clear and striking examples of the attempts of actors to reshape their environment. In a less dramatic yet related sense, many states will still seek to actively influence the conditions in which military operations take place through what are termed ‘shaping strategies.’⁹²

⁹⁰ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 130.

⁹¹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 2004); Yevgeny Zemyatin, *We* (London: Penguin, 1993); George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty Four* (London: Penguin, 1989).

⁹² See Alan Stephens and Nicola Baker, *Making Sense of War: Strategy for the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 101-33.

As this idea of ‘weaving together’ is perhaps somewhat abstract and difficult to conceive it is useful to consider the issue in relation the important subject of strategic culture. The concept refers to the internalised and characteristic ideas, patterns, prejudices, and habits of behaviour that unique security communities display. It emerges from socially transmitted ideas, attitudes, habits, and preferred methods of operation, which in turn derive from collective perceptions and interpretations of historical experiences, as well as feeding upon, in some measure, all the dimensions of context discussed below. Strategic culture essentially approximates to a form of ‘guide to action’ and can be particularly influential in times of crisis and necessity, when cultural instinct often kicks in.⁹³ As Black states it is crucial to understand the ‘plasticity or changeability’ of the term,⁹⁴ and that there may be multiple cultures within individual nations or groups. Nor does culture imply a rigid causality between ideas and behaviour, tradition and action. Groups can display ‘counter-cultural’ behaviour, but in the *longue durée* such instances tend to confirm the overriding attitudinal environment as they tend to ‘revert to type.’ For instance, the massive British continental commitment during World War I did not fundamentally alter its traditional maritime orientation.⁹⁵

So, generally, when groups go to war, they do so possessed of unique sets of assumptions, predispositions, and habits with regard to the use of force. Decisions will at least be influenced by prevailing cultural preconceptions and social norms of behaviour: ‘the human hosts of strategic culture are inalienably part of their own strategic context.’⁹⁶ This culture may be so deeply ingrained that we can begin to talk of a nation’s ‘way of war’ – essentially referring to noticeable continuities in the behaviour of certain strategic cultures. Strategic culture represents an important contextual feature for any nation or armed group, and one that is inextricably part of its unique history and institutions. This represents a notable way in which the groups engaged in war, their institutions and individuals, are to an extent an element of their own context.

⁹³ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, pp. 129-51.

⁹⁴ Jeremy Black, ‘War and international relations: a military historical perspective on force and legitimacy’, in David Armstrong, Theo Farrell, and Bice Maiguashca (eds.), *Force and Legitimacy in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 136.

⁹⁵ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 139.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

Context: important, but not decisive

There is another essential point regarding the concept of context that must be clarified. Clausewitz's emphasis on contextual understanding is, at heart, simply a recognition of its considerable importance as a permanent factor influencing war. This line of argument is not equivalent to suggesting that contextual factors are always the major determinants of success or failure in war. Recognising the importance of context does not entail subscribing to any overarching structural or deterministic causality: agency still matters. It does not entail that actors will behave in any particular way and it is possible for commanders to achieve the defeat of the enemy with little or no comprehension of wider contextual matters. Ultimately, events will be decided by facts on the ground, by actions taken and not taken, and, as Clausewitz stressed, by pure chance or luck. As Gray notes, 'the mystery of combat performance is by no means entirely the product of contextual factors but rather is driven in part by influences integral to war itself.'⁹⁷

For the commander, contextual knowledge is no silver bullet. For the historian, context cannot explain all. As Jeremy Black has noted, too much emphasis on context 'removes the sense of uncertainty in which contemporaries made choices.'⁹⁸ For the historian, hindsight is something of a poisoned chalice to the extent that it can encourage judgements of inevitability based on analyses of prevailing conditions. Perhaps there was an element of truth in John Adams's observation that the British had lost the American War of Independence before the fighting had begun due to the political and geographical context – which entailed suppressing a popular uprising at vast distances from home – but this conclusion underestimates the Patriots' difficulties in creating and sustaining an effective army and the considerable extent of Loyalist sympathies in the southern colonies.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, we can state with considerable confidence that a firm knowledge of context would not only improve a commander's chances but also add significant weight to the historian's analysis. Of course, it is perfectly possible to misdiagnose context; indeed, contextual comprehension is

⁹⁷ Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations*, p. 35.

⁹⁸ Black, *Global Military History*, p. 3.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-8.

notoriously difficult and even potentially overwhelming,¹⁰⁰ and perhaps in such cases we may conclude it would have been better not to try (for the commander, leading to mistaken actions, for the historian, mistaken analyses). Nevertheless, as a general rule, careful consideration of context is to be encouraged. Why is this so?

Context can be viewed as setting the broad parameters within which success in war is achieved, or that may equate to what Barry Watts terms ‘option sets in possibility space.’¹⁰¹ No actor can escape context or circumstance. For instance, states do not have much say as to where they are located, politicians must act in the geopolitical realities of the moment, and commanders have to use the armies that they have available to them. Such facts are the historically determined and largely inescapable conditions within which war is waged. A war will necessarily have to be considerably protracted for notable and serious contextual change to make itself felt, beyond mere circumstantial alteration. For instance, no leader could have turned Germany from a continental power into an island power, no matter how much they may have wished it, and thus solved one of that country’s enduring strategic problems (other than perhaps by completely occupying the Eurasian landmass and creating a German continental island as Hitler so nearly achieved). Through certain measures humans can attempt to solve or mitigate the problems posed by the various conditions in which they find themselves, but they cannot escape from context itself.

For instance, it is largely axiomatic in modern counterinsurgency doctrine that winning the allegiance of the people to the government is the sure root to success, and many practical implications flow from that basic premise.¹⁰² Yet, that assumption is heavily context dependent to the extent in which it relates to a specifically Western liberal-democratic approach to counterinsurgency. Historically, the alternative approach for many tyrannical regimes has been a far more direct military, forceful, and repressive approach along the lines of ‘kill them all, let God sort them out.’¹⁰³ John Nagl notes the approach adopted by

¹⁰⁰ Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations*, p. 10.

¹⁰¹ Barry Watts *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War* (Washington: National Defense University, 1996), p. 54.

¹⁰² See, for instance, David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006).

¹⁰³ Charles Townshend, ‘counter-insurgency’, in Richard Holmes (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 231.

King William II in suppressing a Welsh revolt in the late eleventh century in which he ‘intended to abolish and utterly destroy all of the people until there should be alive not so much as a dog.’¹⁰⁴ Unconstrained by the standards expected of liberal regimes and unconcerned by electoral politics, many autocrats have suppressed uprisings with calculated and audacious efficiency, if not wholesale slaughter. Where liberal states have resorted to elements of such an approach (such as torture, massacres, or forced resettlement), this has usually led to local or domestic political turmoil, such as highlighted by the French experience in Algeria during the 1950s and 60s.¹⁰⁵ In this light, the context of democratic domestic politics represents a crucial determinant which makes the minimum use of force and winning the support of the population a far more expedient, if still hugely difficult approach. Of course the matter is more complex than this, but the example serves to highlight a basic point about the delimiting effect of context in terms of possible effective courses of action.

From the commander’s perspective, a wilful disregard of context is a likely cause of strategic failure. Certain contextual factors may come close to strategically dooming an actor before the act of war itself. But, again, we can not go as far as saying the result is entirely determined, even if the context suggests it may be *probable*. Again, the impact of contingent factors pervade the whole course of war – as examined in Chapter 5 – and make prediction of outcomes based on objective conditions impossible. If such certainty existed we would not expect war to occur at all as the outcome would be preordained. At a minimum, contextual knowledge may enable strategists to anticipate likely enemy weaknesses that can be exploited, protect against potentially counter-productive actions, or prepare more appropriately for future scenarios. At best, shrewd use of contextual knowledge may allow the commander to threaten the use of force in a way that causes the enemy’s capitulation before a shot has even been fired. Context sets the conditions in which certain strategies and tactics are likely to be effective. It is for belligerents to generate strategic outcomes and to use means effectively toward the attainment of specified ends, but the use of those means

¹⁰⁴ John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 26.

¹⁰⁵ This was particularly a consequence of French actions, such as the widespread use of torture. For a brief account of the war, see William Polk, *Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency, Terrorism and Guerrilla War, from the American Revolution to Iraq* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), pp. 124-43.

should be adapted to the context in which they are employed. This goes a long way in explaining why the opponents of Napoleon were unable to defeat the Emperor's forces until they adapted sufficiently to keep pace with the new form of war generated by radically altered social, political, and, ultimately, military realities.

From the historian's perspective, a wilful disregard of context is a likely cause of parochial explanations and limited analysis. Yet we should not be over-impressed by what context can explain, even if analysis of context makes certain outcomes appear inevitable. Outcomes may have been as much the result of great generalship, chance happenings, or decisions taken on the day. Nevertheless, at a minimum, knowledge of context enables the historian to appreciate why exactly the belligerents are fighting, why they are using the weapons they are, why the public is reacting as it is, and so on. At most, context may constitute the most crucial and decisive factor in the explanation of a strategic outcome. Context provides greater meaning to otherwise seemingly arbitrary events and enables deeper causal analysis. Historians are entitled to describe events as they happened, but they will make little sense if entirely detached from causative historical context.

The dimensions of context

Up to this point our discussion of context has taken place at a somewhat abstract level in order to determine some of its most important aspects in theoretical terms. Yet, we need to develop a clearer idea of how context is manifested in reality and what elements comprise its substantive dimensions. This section thus outlines those fundamental aspects of context that have served to shape the character and actions of war-making peoples throughout the course of human history. Yet, just how far can we go in theory on this subject? Given the inherent changeability of context, there is a limit to what can be stated with universal applicability other than to outline its most salient features. As noted, detailed description of context is only possible in relation to specific events or periods. In relation to any particular war, some of the major dimensions will bear more heavily than others, and some at different stages, depending on the

unique dynamics of the conflict, such as its length, location, the character of the belligerents, their objectives, and so on.

Linked to this, it must be noted why only key dimensions will be considered here: of course, it would be theoretically possible to keep widening our scope to incorporate all the multifarious aspects of context in their infinite variety. Such an undertaking is far beyond the aims of this thesis and, as Gray comments, ‘One can offer too big a big picture.’¹⁰⁶ As Knox notes, we – and in particular those responsible for making strategy – must narrow our focus to some extent because ‘too much complexity makes the mind seize.’¹⁰⁷ If one attempts to reflect simultaneously on all past wars that have been fought and the contexts that shaped them, the result is almost mental paralysis. The vast complexities of the world and the diversity of forms conditions can take, particularly in relation to a subject as open and comprehensive as war, is certainly cause for theoretical modesty, but even then prominent categories and essential dimensions crystallise in our thinking and serve as comprehensible avenues into the almost infinite possibilities of reality. Here we are interested only in the fundamental dimensions of context and those that relate, demonstrably and consistently to war. Of course, within each of these dimensions exists the potential for great variation with regard to its particular manifestation in historical and real-world cases. Some representative examples are provided simply to make clear the kind of factors described.

In delineating between the various categories of context, the aim is simply to draw attention to those dimensions that have impacted on war throughout history and are likely to continue to do so. This categorisation does not imply that in relation to any particular war, all dimensions will be equally influential. Analysis of any specific war requires careful study and identification of the primary causative contextual factors. It is likely that at least some consideration of all dimensions will be pertinent to specific cases, but the following typology need not be followed rigidly and there are various possible approaches that may be employed; approaches which may better reflect the complexity and interactions between the different dimensions in reality. What

¹⁰⁶ Gray, *Bloody Century*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁷ MacGregor Knox, ‘Conclusion: Continuity and revolution in the Making of strategy’, in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (eds.), *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 645.

follows is an analytically simplified and idealised typology, not a rigid blue-print for critical historical analysis or, for that matter, strategic planning.

Whilst these divisions are analytically necessary and useful, it must be borne in mind that there are considerable interconnections across these conceptual divides. Indeed, as noted in the previous section, context should properly be conceived of as a complex web of interacting dimensions which continually shape and impact on each other over time and of which the actors themselves are constitutive. As Gray notes, 'warfare, contains and expresses all those dimensions, or contexts, all the time, and they each influence all the others.'¹⁰⁸ For instance, geography has a powerful influence on political and strategic cultures,¹⁰⁹ whilst advances in technology can radically alter social relations or power balances. Below we will consider each of these dimensions in some measure of analytical isolation to simply, as Clausewitz put it, 'elucidate the idea we wish to convey.'¹¹⁰

Historical context

Context makes little sense without understanding its connection to history or historical chronology – in fact, history can be conceived as one of context's prominent dimensions. What do we mean by this? From one perspective history provides context with its form: social relations do not exist in isolation from time, are crucially affected by prior events, and in our analysis of the 'here and now' the past cannot be ignored. Because all actors are necessarily located in time, they cannot but be affected by what has gone before them, either in the way history shapes material realities or through its impact on social and cultural forms. Emphasising chronology may appear to be little more than a nuisance, but in fact it can be crucial to proper contextual understanding. As Gray notes in relation to World War II, 'the 1930s in Germany were, of course, 'made' in the 1920s, which in turn were 'made' by the Great War...we see the origins of Nazi Germany in the (German) myth of an undefeated army in 1918 and in the

¹⁰⁸ Gray, *Bloody Century*, p. 57.

¹⁰⁹ Kaplan makes this point in relation to Churchill's reading of the different peoples of the Sudan during the 'River War' of the late nineteenth century in which he fought. Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), p. 21.

¹¹⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 215.

Weimar Republic, just as we see the several holocausts of 1945 rooted in the new Germany of the 1930s.’¹¹¹

Perceptions and understandings of what happened in the past (whether true or false) powerfully shapes the ideas and behaviour of those in the present. The effects of history can influence events in the most subtle and imperceptible ways, as it feeds into the consciousness, assumptions, and beliefs of those acting in the present, but where the precise impact is difficult to fathom. Sometimes, however, the contextual impact of history may be more apparent. Examples of the crucial importance of history in shaping the causes and course of war are manifold. For instance, there can be little doubt that the spate of revolutionary wars in the third quarter of the twentieth century were powerfully influenced by the example of Mao’s successful guerrilla campaign in China¹¹² and the image of ‘self-consciously hairy-chested’ masculinity embodied in Che.¹¹³

History also feeds into the institutional memory of war-making institutions. In his book *European Armies and the Conduct of War*, Strachan reveals how armed forces developed new doctrines and plans based on their earlier experiences of various campaigns.¹¹⁴ Similarly, the Napoleonic campaigns served as a major source of operational lessons for most European militaries up until the First World War, as the understanding of them was filtered through various interpretations.¹¹⁵ This was particularly so in France where the offensive spirit of Napoleonic warfare was emphasised even as technological change appeared to point to the importance of the defensive (as tentatively revealed during the American Civil War or the Russo-Japanese War). Earlier, in Clausewitz’s Prussia, memory of past successes under Frederick the Great was one reason out-dated methods were retained: in this way sometimes history, as context, can retard contemporary adaptation to changing conditions.

History also influences war in more direct (even personal) ways in shaping belligerents behaviour and reactions in certain situations. History can

¹¹¹ Colin S. Gray, ‘Clausewitz rules, OK? The future is the past – with GPS’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, 1999, p. 167.

¹¹² See Brian Crozier, ‘The Strategic Uses of Revolutionary War’, in Alistair Buchan (ed.), *Problems of Modern Strategy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), pp. 198-219.

¹¹³ Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 74

¹¹⁴ Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Kings Lynn: Routledge, 2006).

¹¹⁵ Gray notes how, ‘Intellectually, notwithstanding the galloping material progress of the nineteenth century, the leading theories of war were, and remained, decidedly Napoleonic.’ Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations*, p. 34.

inform perceptions about other groups and indeed, one's own group, based on past experiences or historical myth. The ongoing Arab-Israeli Conflict is a notable case in this respect. This emotionally charged confrontation is pervaded by memories of many earlier wars (in particular those of 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982) which have served to further polarise opinion on either side and exacerbate tensions in the region. The importance of history is noticeably strong in the Middle East, where many armed groups name themselves after notable dates or key figures¹¹⁶ and a culture of martyrdom is particularly prevalent. History can sometimes lend disproportionate importance to otherwise barren territory, inflame hatreds where peaceful coexistence once reigned, or prevent resolution of a political problem where common ground might otherwise exist. Regarding the latter, if between two peoples there exists a history of conflict and betrayal, peaceful solutions to current wars may prove all that harder to achieve.

Many of the other dimensions of context discussed below, are importantly shaped by historical determinants. History continually weaves together political, social, and cultural threads over time, and represents a combination of traditions, experience, and inherited beliefs. Thus, to consider cultural context as a static phenomenon, independent of time and history would be wholly inaccurate. We may be able to talk of the particular manifestation of culture in relation to a specific event, but the concept is dependent for its form on its historical background. Past wars may be considered the most potent aspects of history: particularly if long, involving great sacrifices, or marking important turning points in a nation's history, they can be powerful shapers of attitudes and behaviour down the years, even ones fought hundreds of years ago, whether victory or defeat. For instance, the conflict in Kosovo between Serbs and Albanians during the 1990s was pervaded by the memory of the Serbian defeat in the 1389 Battle of Kosovo Polje. Tim Judah has even remarked that, in Kosovo,

¹¹⁶ For instance, one Iraqi Sunni nationalist resistance group is named the '1920 Revolution Brigades' referring to the uprising against British colonial rule of that year. Modern armed Palestinian terrorist groups, as well as the rockets they fire into Israel, are named after the early heroic martyr Izz al-Din al-Qassam. Also, the Palestinian terrorist group 'Black September' was named after the month in which Jordan launched a campaign to crush Palestinian organisations on its territory in 1970. Michael Burleigh, *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism* (London: Harper Press, 2008), pp. 91 and 155-56.

‘history is war by other means.’¹¹⁷ In this way, history becomes inextricably intertwined with political realities.

Political context

This dimension of context encompasses a wide variety of elements, foremost amongst which are the nature of the political tensions between groups, the distribution of power in the system, and the political conditions and relationships within and beyond states leading up to and during war. Here we are concerned with prevailing power dynamics, be they local, domestic, regional, or international in scope. The political context is fundamentally characterised by persistent change and is inextricably intertwined with other contexts from economic power, technological sophistication, or religious or ideological values, all which feed into the power constellations, which surround and run through war. The development and emergence of morphing political conditions over time brings forth the precise conditions which lead to conflict between groups and serve as basic underlying determinants of war’s character throughout and into the subsequent peace. As Gray notes, ‘The political context is the source of, and provides the meaning for, war and its conduct in warfare.’¹¹⁸ The political ‘womb in which war develops’¹¹⁹ can be comprised of a complex mixture of internal and external factors which coalesce to cause a state of confrontation between groups over certain issues.

So, for instance, in his analysis of the wars of his age, it was changed political conditions which Clausewitz stressed as the fundamental determinants of their cause and character, both with respect to the internal permutations emanating from the political and social consequences of the French Revolution, but also regarding the impact of these changes on the wider international political order of Europe. The ideals embodied in the new republican French state represented a serious ideological threat to the cherished traditions and social patterns of the conservative states of Europe (propagandised by the activities of

¹¹⁷ Tim Judah, *Kosovo: War and Revenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 1-32.

¹¹⁸ Colin S. Gray, *Recognizing and Understanding Revolutionary Change in Warfare: The Sovereignty of Context* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), p. 15.

¹¹⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 173.

anti-revolutionary *émigrés*), whilst – as Edmund Burke powerfully argued¹²⁰ – the subsequent Empire building of Napoleon threatened the unwritten, yet powerful stabilising norm of the balance of power on which relations between *ancien régime* states had been based for at least a century or more.¹²¹

Also, domestic political conditions constitute powerful forces on war. For instance, following Napoleon's exile to St Helena most of Europe became predominantly concerned with domestic political instability and fears of insurrection, thus post-Napoleonic armies were generally limited in size and conscription was abandoned in many states, primarily because rulers had to ensure soldiers were loyal in order to face revolutionary insurgents.¹²² Only with the rapid rise of nationalism in the late nineteenth century were the domestic political conditions in place for the 'total wars' of the twentieth. The impact of internal political conditions is particularly apparent in relation to the wars conducted by modern liberal democratic states. With their free media, civil society, and frequent electoral cycles, leaders in wartime are faced with profound political and military conundrums. This is particularly noticeable in Western 'wars of choice' due to the difficulty of explaining the necessity of intervention, justifying mounting casualties, and resisting pressure for precipitate 'exit plans' when often the overriding strategic requirement is the will to stay the course and prove to populations that they will continue to provide security.¹²³

¹²⁰ Chris Brown, Terry Nardin, and Nicholas Rengger (eds.), *International Relations in Political Thought: Texts from the Ancient Greeks to the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), The modern European state system, p. 254.

¹²¹ The origins of the balance of power probably goes back to around the sixteenth century, but it was developed in a clearer form during the eighteenth century, for instance being apparent in the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht which ended the War of the Spanish Succession. In an article on the balance of power written in 1806, the Prussian diplomat Friedrich von Gentz stated that: 'Only when one or another state wilfully...cause[s], on the one hand, the subjugation of its weaker neighbours and, on the other hand, perpetual danger, gradual debilitation and the final downfall of its stronger neighbours, only then, according to sound conceptions of the interests of a union of states, is a breakdown of the balance effected; only then do several states combine and prevent by means of an opportune counterweight the predominance of an individual state.' Friedrich von Gentz, 'The True Concept of a Balance of Power', in Brown et al, *International Relations in Political Thought*, p. 306.

¹²² Howard, *Franco-Prussian War*, pp. 8-9.

¹²³ Paul Cornish, 'The United States and counterinsurgency: 'political first, political last, political always'', *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1, January, 2009, p. 62.

Socio-cultural context

In an essay on 'The Germans and the French' written in 1807 Clausewitz notes that 'the character of a nation, even insofar as its original, fragile nature may be affected by changing customs, is not as easily reshaped as philosophers and moralists seem to think.'¹²⁴ This idea is presented in a discussion of the potential impact of national character on war and conveys the importance he attached between socio-cultural conditions and war. Written soon after the disaster of 1806, he notes that, 'I cannot conceal it from myself how far the German national character has contributed to our present condition.'¹²⁵

Prevailing social forms, cultural norms, taboos, attitudes, traditions, ideologies, religious beliefs, and values are all crucial factors influencing the complexion of war. Even popular culture such as works of fiction might impact on war in important ways.¹²⁶ Whereas traditional approaches tend to focus on material features, Black stresses that it is 'far from clear that variations...in 'cultural' factors, and related norms, should play a smaller role in the history of war than weaponry.'¹²⁷ As noted, these elements of context are strongly connected to history in the way such forces are moulded and refashioned over time by events, interaction with other communities, and the impact of changing material conditions. Socio-cultural change may be gradual or subject to more rapid transformation, often due to war itself,¹²⁸ enforced cultural change, religious conversion, economic trends, or the spread of new ideologies.

Cultural factors may constitute crucial determinants of behaviour, shaping decision makers perceptions regarding strategic alternatives. If, for instance, we can speak of a modern Western 'way of war', it is strongly shaped

¹²⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, 'The Germans and the French', in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 252.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 252.

¹²⁶ Popular fiction in the years prior to 1914 depicted total victories over old and despicable enemies, and as Bond describes, 'Suddenly transferred from myths relating to legendary past to the near future, and based on real national rivalries, these 'popular epics for a period of universal literacy' offered a seductive ultimate solution to national problems.' Bond, *Pursuit of Victory*, p. 86. Also, as another example, the impact of pseudo-scientific literature in Germany with its popular, inaccurate, and distorted Darwinian ideas importantly played into the racist propaganda of the Nazi Party. To take a more modern example, Black notes how films 'capture an important shift in cultural values, because the heroes are often defiant individuals...the discipline and comradeship of military units is not the model for modern images.' Jeremy Black, *War and the New Disorder in the 21st Century* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 16.

¹²⁷ Jeremy Black, *War Since 1945* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), p. 13.

¹²⁸ Consider, for instance, the significant socio-political consequences of World War I and II.

by prevalent socio-cultural forces. Jeremy Black has identified a number of prominent trends in this respect.¹²⁹ He points to a ‘Revolution in Attitudes towards the Military’ influenced by the spread of democratisation, human rights discourse, individualism, hedonism, changed gender relationships, and a burgeoning human rights discourse,¹³⁰ which – although the trends from one country to the next may be highly variable – have contributed to a decline of civic militarism, societal debellicisation, and a general reliance on professionalised forces.¹³¹ Martin Shaw subsumes these changes into the notion of an emergent Western ‘post-military society.’¹³² Consequently, Western publics demand that collateral damage and both civilian and military casualties are kept to a minimum, particularly in wars of choice where losses are deemed unnecessary.¹³³ This in turn has contributed to a reliance in Western military operations on precision air-power and technological virtuosity,¹³⁴ as well as ‘force protection.’¹³⁵ This is of course just one general example. It is important to keep in mind the vast possibilities encompassed in this dimension, be it manifested in the culture of glory and imperial ambition of Rome, the religious fanaticism of the European middle ages, or the secular religions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Another important aspect of this socio-cultural context is the state of attitudes on the ethics of the use of force, which may create significant problems of legitimacy for political leaders where the use of the military instrument runs up against widespread moral concern. In modern times, public attitudes regarding the morality of war have become greatly entangled with legalistic

¹²⁹ Black, *Disorder*, p. 13.

¹³⁰ Black notes that this decline has resulted primarily from social shifts and ideological and cultural pressures. They represent a good example of ‘the extent to which changing conceptions that are not inherently military nevertheless have direct and major impact on military life and possibilities.’ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-25.

¹³² Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and its Crisis in Iraq* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 7.

¹³³ McInnes, *Spectator-Sport Warfare*, p. 72.

¹³⁴ These means, it is argued, represent ways of projecting force far from the West, targeting leaders rather than societies, reducing collateral damage through clean and precise strikes, minimising the risk to Western forces, and allowing for attacks against enemy centre’s of gravity as opposed to fielded forces in large-scale battles. The demand for such capabilities, is strongly predicated on the prevailing social and cultural attitudes in Western society. *Ibid.*, pp. 143-45.

¹³⁵ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 143.

interpretations, so that the two have become almost indistinguishable in rhetorical terms.¹³⁶ This brings us to the legal dimension of context.

Legal and ethical context

Clausewitz ostensibly downplays the importance of the law, custom, and ethical considerations in war; a position consistent with many classical realist thinkers.¹³⁷ Famously, in the opening chapter of *On War*, he states that, ‘Attached to force are certain self-imposed, imperceptible limitations hardly worth mentioning, known as international law and custom, but they scarcely weaken it.’¹³⁸ Yet, we must recognise that this point is made as he is progressing toward his abstract discussion of absolute war. Thus, he is wanting to stress that, logically, such factors do little to limit the inherent escalatory dynamic of war. Nevertheless, Clausewitz’s overall attitude is certainly one that downplays the role of law or morality, and which views the use of force in the prevailing *realpolitik* conception whereby necessity entails that states are deemed to have a natural, general right to use force to secure their interests. In true Machiavellian style,¹³⁹ Clausewitz remarks that ‘mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst’¹⁴⁰ and ‘Woe to the government, which relying on half-hearted politics and a shackled military policy, meets a foe who, like the untamed elements, knows no other law than his own power!’¹⁴¹

However, a closer analysis perhaps reveals a more inclusive conception. It is apparent that Clausewitz would at least have been aware of the potential influence of such factors, as even the extreme exponent of *realpolitik*,

¹³⁶ A point made by Rupert Smith in relation to modern wars: ‘Now we are fighting wars amongst the people we are confusing the legality of our actions with their morality, whether in considering entering the war or its conduct...there is a perception that the legality of engaging in combat also establishes its morality – and vice versa.’ Smith, *Utility*, p. 378.

¹³⁷ See Stephen Forde, ‘Classical Realism’, in Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, *Traditions of International Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 62-84.

¹³⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 83. Creveld believes, with that sentence, Clausewitz ‘dismisses the entire tremendous body of international law and custom in a single irreverent sentence.’ Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, p. 65.

¹³⁹ Machiavelli stated that ‘wars are just when they are necessary.’ Quoted in Howard, *War in European History*, p. 23.

¹⁴⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 84

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 257. Thucydides expresses a related point through the Athenians during their debate with the Spartans prior to the outbreak of war: ‘It has always been a rule that the weak should be subject to the strong; and besides, we consider that we are worthy of our power. Up till the present you, too, used to think that we were; but now, after calculating your own interest, you are beginning to talk in terms of right and wrong.’ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, p. 80.

Machiavelli recognised before him.¹⁴² As Howard notes, ‘He knew very well...that the conduct of war was subject to considerably greater and more perceptible limitations in his own times than it had been in the days of, say, Genghis Kahn.’¹⁴³ Personally, Clausewitz’s internment under ‘easy conditions’ following his capture at the Battle of Auerstedt in 1806 owed a great deal to the conventions of the time.¹⁴⁴ Also, his dismissive tone in the opening chapter is balanced somewhat by the emphasis he places on the importance of social norms: for instance, that armies in the eighteenth century did not generally plunder and lay waste to the enemy’s land largely owed to ‘the spirit of the times.’¹⁴⁵ Whilst most limitations in war he attributed to practical objective considerations, the balance of power,¹⁴⁶ or the more effective and intelligent use of force,¹⁴⁷ Clausewitz did not entirely reject the potential importance of law and ethical considerations – they were rolled up with general social norms, which vary in their relative form and influence throughout history. Nevertheless, particularly in the light of modern history, we need to acknowledge the insufficient attention Clausewitz devoted to this subject.

It is important to note that the laws of war (understood both in the sense of unwritten cultural norms and as positive law, both crude and sophisticated) and ethical traditions of war, both concerning when war is justified (*jus ad bellum*) and what is permissible during war (*jus in bello*), have exerted varying levels of influence on war throughout history.¹⁴⁸ From the customs of primitive tribes and Roman Fetial Law, to Chivalric codes and the Geneva Conventions, societies have sought to establish when war is justified and what is deemed acceptable behaviour in war, in particular with regard to the treatment of prisoners, the rights of non-combatants and the wounded, and the weaponry

¹⁴² Forde, ‘Classical Realism’, pp. 68-69.

¹⁴³ Michael Howard, ‘Constraints on Warfare’, in Michael Howard, George Andreopoulos, and Mark Shulman (eds.), *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World* (New York: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ This point is made by Creveld in *The Transformation of War*, pp. 66-67.

¹⁴⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 714.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 714.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁸ As Murray Forsyth notes, ‘The nature of these forms and modalities varies according to the structures and unity of the bodies concerned, and also according to the religious, ethnic, and cultural factors that create links and affinities between them, or which deepen and accentuate their political differences. Despite their immense variation, the overall tendency is unmistakable.’ Murray Forsyth, ‘The Tradition of International Law’, in Nardin and Mapel, *International Ethics*, p. 23.

employed. In the last century, the laws have extended further to cover a great many other issues.¹⁴⁹ For much of history, the laws of war have consisted largely of unwritten social understandings, whilst powerful ethical traditions – such as that of the Christian ‘Just War’ and its more recent secular juristic descendants, which incidentally display continuing vitality and power in modern times¹⁵⁰ – have importantly shaped public discourse and the decisions of political and military leaders.

The last 150 years has seen the increasing codification of the ‘laws of war’ – themselves strongly influenced by the precepts of the Just War tradition¹⁵¹ – and principally since the late 1850s after the Red Cross and first Geneva Conventions were introduced. Subsequently, numerous important developments¹⁵² have further consolidated legal prohibitions on war, whilst ethical thinking has tended to converge with such juristic conceptions.¹⁵³ The importance placed on these constraints by states is testified by the legions of Western lawyers standing over commanders authorising attacks on individual targets in modern military operations.¹⁵⁴ Also, the general right of ‘legitimate’ sovereign entities to wage war has, principally since 1918, been essentially reduced to the right of self-defence, whilst ‘virtual equality before the law’ for non-state entities, such as insurgent movements, has been introduced.¹⁵⁵

These are all crucial developments that testify to the remarkable developments in this area with all their implications for the conduct of war, even if, as throughout history, laws are observed more in breach than observance. The

¹⁴⁹ See Creveld, *Transformation*, p. 88.

¹⁵⁰ Rengger notes that, ‘Many of the arguments surrounding deterrence policy during the Cold War, military interventions (or lack of them) from the 1960s to 1990s and the ‘war against terrorism’ now are couched in language that would be broadly familiar to those theologians, philosophers and jurists who largely created the just war tradition.’ Nicholas Rengger, ‘On the just war tradition in the twenty first century’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 2, 2002, pp. 353.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 355.

¹⁵² Among them, for instance, the 1899 and 1907 Hague peace conferences, the 1945 UN Charter, the revision and expansion of the Geneva Conventions in 1949 and subsequent amendments and Additional Protocols, and the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2002.

¹⁵³ Nicholas Rengger, ‘The judgement of war: on the idea of legitimate force in world politics’, in David Armstrong, Theo Farrell, and Bice Maiguashca (eds.), *Force and Legitimacy in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 150-52.

¹⁵⁴ Ignatieff notes that, ‘The Western military’s response to sharpened moral and political exposure has been to call in the lawyers. Commanders have concluded that they must have targets vetted for moral and legal suitability before they launch their air-crews. The consequence has been an extraordinary growth in the power and influence of military lawyers at every level of the targeting and deployment process.’ Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and beyond* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 197.

¹⁵⁵ Howard, ‘Constraints’, p. 11.

trinitarian framework must be capable of incorporating these ideas as potentially and variably influential contextual factors, and we have shown that there is evidence that Clausewitz would accept this, even if he did emphasise, perhaps rightly, the limits of law and moral concern in an activity so pervaded by necessity.¹⁵⁶

Socio-economic context

It is somewhat easy to forget that, 'Wars, after all, must be paid for',¹⁵⁷ and as Strachan notes, 'it remains helpful to consider the economic constraints on military policy as a distinct pressure on the development of war's conduct.'¹⁵⁸ Troops have to be paid, fed, and supplied, weapons procured, and so on: as Gray reminds us, this dimension is 'fundamental, enduring, comprehensive, and inescapable.'¹⁵⁹ Throughout history wars have been shaped by what is and what is not possible economically. From a broader perspective, – as Gat and Paul Kennedy have demonstrated – economic wealth has, particularly during the early modern period, constituted a major factor in determining military superiority and the relative power of nations.¹⁶⁰ This is, of course not a novel concern: Coker suggests one of the principal reasons Carthage was defeated by Rome in the Second Punic War (218-201 BC) was because they were less wealthy than

¹⁵⁶ We should also add the sceptical note that laws or customs may be adhered to for more strategic reasons – such as the importance of securing broad legitimacy for an operation; a factor particularly relevant to modern wars where public opinion is so crucial – rather than a necessary belief in the binding nature of the precept. Where extreme necessity comes to the fore, it is notable what lengths actors are willing to go to either redefine, stretch, or even ignore existing rules. The extensive debate concerning America's responses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks relates to such issues, particularly regarding to the right of pre-emptive/preventive attacks and the applicability of the Geneva Conventions with respect to torture and the status of so-called unlawful 'enemy combatants.'

¹⁵⁷ Mark Grimsley, 'Surviving military revolution: The U.S Civil War', in Knox and Murray, *Military Revolution*, p. 84.

¹⁵⁸ Strachan, *European Armies*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁹ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁰ Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 489-96. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London: Fontana Press, 1989).

Rome.¹⁶¹ In modern times, it has been argued that economic factors attained an almost strategic lead role in the two World Wars of the twentieth century.¹⁶²

Military operations are often fought to secure resource rich territory to further fuel war or simply as a result of acquisitiveness, to fill the state's coffers. For instance, Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938 was partly undertaken in order to secure additional important resources to boost Germany's faltering rearmament programme.¹⁶³ Part of his wider political vision was the idea of German economic recovery through territorial expansion and the annexation of *lebensraum* in the East. Subsequently, important strategic decisions were impelled by the need to acquire vital resources, in particular 'Operation Blue' of 1942 intended to capture the Soviet oil fields in the Caucasus,¹⁶⁴ thus 'feeding war by war', as Napoleon had perfected previously.¹⁶⁵

At least since the demise of mercantilism in the eighteenth century, prominent commentators have held that the context of increasing global economic interdependence and interconnectedness will foster peace, given the increasing costs of going to war. In the 1790s Thomas Paine stated that commerce is 'a pacific system, operating to cordialize mankind, by rendering nations useful to each other...If commerce were permitted to act to the universal extent it is capable, it would extirpate the system of war.'¹⁶⁶ This was a hope famously dashed in 1914 and ever-increasing globalisation has failed to curb the outbreak of war in recent years, perhaps even exacerbating the tensions that lead

¹⁶¹ Coker, *Waging War*, p. 41. Economic factors were also crucial to the earlier First Punic War. Gat notes how 'it was wealthy citizens who pushed the Roman state to carry out one last effort, lending it the money to build one last war fleet, with its successful appearance at sea driving Carthage to sue for peace.' Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 487.

¹⁶² Knox notes that 'any war fought between great powers for vital objectives now turns as much on total economic power...as on immediate battlefield success.' Knox, 'Conclusion: Continuity and revolution in the making of strategy', p. 640. He also refers to Churchill's realisation that Pearl Harbour was a 'strategic blessing' in that it brought the full weight of American economic might to the Allied effort.

¹⁶³ Wilhelm Deist, 'The Road to Ideological War: Germany, 1918-1945', in Murray et al, *Makers of Strategy*, p. 383.

¹⁶⁴ See John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 179-81. Keegan notes that the 'economic arguments for the operation were immeasurable.'

¹⁶⁵ Creveld, *Transformation*, p. 77.

¹⁶⁶ Quoted in Gat, *War and Civilisation*, p. 510. John Stuart Mill similarly wrote that, 'It is commerce which is rapidly rendering war obsolete, by strengthening and multiplying the personal interests which act in natural opposition to it.' Quoted in Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience: The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures in the University of Cambridge, 1977* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), p. 37.

to conflict.¹⁶⁷ Historian Niall Ferguson has argued that the wars of the twentieth century were propelled forward by economic volatility (both in times of decline and rapid growth) which intensified socio-political tensions, promoted instability in weakening empires, undermined new democracies, and heightened racial antipathies.¹⁶⁸ In a similar vein, many prognostications of future conflict point to the potential for great instability caused by resource scarcity and social ruptures caused by economic tensions.¹⁶⁹

It is common to note that Clausewitz paid little heed to the economic dimension of war. He barely discussed Napoleon's 'Continental System' and Knox notes how he was surprisingly 'mute on the revolution in the mills and iron-foundries that had kept Britain fighting until triumph at Waterloo',¹⁷⁰ yet it would be mistaken to claim that he did not understand its general importance.¹⁷¹ Clausewitz notes how, at the end of the seventeenth century the power of states 'lay entirely in their treasuries' as money payments, supported by a more efficient administrative machinery, allowed central governments to recruit large standing armies.¹⁷² Through the eighteenth century the means which states had to wage war came to be based largely on the available 'money in their coffers.' Thus, Clausewitz clearly recognised that the financial context was a major factor shaping the wars of the age.¹⁷³

Whilst the economic dimension of war is important – and has perhaps been close to decisive in some modern wars – it is perhaps useful to remember Machiavelli's advice that it is 'imprudent to accept the common maxim that riches are the sinews of war.'¹⁷⁴ Economic factors should be viewed as strategic

¹⁶⁷ Kaldor states that there is a 'growing cultural dissonance between those who participate in transnational networks...and those who are excluded from global processes and are tied to localities' and that 'the processes known as globalisation are breaking up cultural and socio-economic divisions...The new type of warfare has to be understood in terms of this global dislocation.' Just how important the global/particularist division is as a central dynamic in modern wars is a debatable issue. Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), p. 69-70.

¹⁶⁸ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: History's Age of Hatred* (London: Penguin, 2006), 'Introduction', pp. xxxiii-lxxi.

¹⁶⁹ See Paul Rogers, *Losing Control: Global Security in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

¹⁷⁰ Knox, 'Conclusion: Continuity and revolution in the making of strategy', p. 639.

¹⁷¹ Many of his historical studies refer to the importance of economic and financial matters.

¹⁷² Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 711-12.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 713.

¹⁷⁴ Skinner, *Machiavelli*, p. 85. Knox also quotes Machiavelli: 'gold is not always able to get good soldiers, but good soldiers are always able to find gold.' Knox, 'Conclusion: Continuity and revolution in the making of strategy', p. 638.

enablers – wars still have to be fought and won at the operational and tactical levels,¹⁷⁵ and as the Americans in Vietnam learnt, massive economic superiority is no guarantee of strategic success. Also, Richard Overy has dismissed the popular thesis that Gross Domestic Product won World War II.¹⁷⁶ Economic factors, like technology, are best considered as crucial material contextual forces, but that do not warrant inclusion as part of war's inherent nature, as some commentators, such as Ian Roxborough and Michael Handel have proposed.¹⁷⁷ As Stephen Biddle argues, material preponderance has been exaggerated and states' relative economic, demographic or industrial strengths are poor indicators of military power; they only matter if they can be effectively exploited through modern doctrines of tactical force employment.¹⁷⁸ Similarly, Paret remarks that Clausewitz was too knowledgeable to equate mere wealth with military strength.¹⁷⁹ Of course, perhaps the principal reason economic power is crucial in war, is so that political entities have the ability to invest in, produce, or buy the myriad material implements of war. After all, as Machiavelli stated, 'war is made with steel and not with gold.'¹⁸⁰ This brings us to the technological context of war.

Technological context

A frequent critique levelled at Clausewitz's conception of the trinity is that it fails to sufficiently address the importance of technology as an integral element of war. This was probably due in large part to the fact that the rate of technological change had been relatively gradual in the period prior to and around the time Clausewitz wrote. The advances in technology since

¹⁷⁵ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, pp. 32-33.

¹⁷⁶ He notes that, 'The balance of economic product explains everything and nothing...The line between material resources and victory on the battlefield is anything but a straight one. The history of war is littered with examples of smaller, materially disadvantaged states defeating a larger, richer enemy.' Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Pimlico, 1996), pp. 316-17.

¹⁷⁷ Ian Roxborough, 'Clausewitz and the Sociology of War', *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 45, No. 4, December, 1994, pp. 619-36. Michael I. Handel, 'Clausewitz in the Age of Technology', in Michael I. Handel (ed.), *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), pp. 51-92.

¹⁷⁸ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 3-11 and 190-96.

¹⁷⁹ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 209.

¹⁸⁰ Machiavelli quoted in Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 86.

Clausewitz's day have indeed been rapid and far-reaching.¹⁸¹ Yet, Clausewitz was right not to view technology as part of war's intrinsic nature, but rather as a constant shaping contextual dimension. As he states, 'It is clear that weapons and equipment are not essential to the concept of fighting, since even wrestling is fighting of a kind.'¹⁸² Whilst the relationship of technology with all dimensions of war is important and complex, it is essential to maintain perspective. Jeremy Black suggests that 'technology has to be understood as an aspect of an entire socio-economic system'¹⁸³ and as Gray notes, 'Technology is only one dimension of warfare, and at that not the most important.'¹⁸⁴ Technological superiority alone has rarely assured victory and, moreover, in the longer term, 'Every new device and mode of war carries the virus of its own technical, tactical, operational, strategic, or political negation.'¹⁸⁵

The technological dimension is indeed a vast subject covering many subsidiary elements, including weapons, communications, transport, intelligence collecting equipment, or even food preservation.¹⁸⁶ That technology has, since the beginning of human history, constantly shaped and reshaped the waging of war in important ways is an unremarkable observation. Since the scientific/industrial revolution, the pace of technological change has certainly accelerated and the potential material means available to humans have proliferated – there simply is not room here to describe such changes in detail. More recently, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5, technology has been the driving force behind a so-called 'Revolution in Military Affairs', whereby precision weapons, numerous high-tech sensors, and information technology have been exploited to enhance military effectiveness. As with the introduction of revolutionary new technologies in war throughout history, no doubt the character or 'face' of war will be transformed, yet, as history again suggests,

¹⁸¹ Knox provides a concise summary of the most significant technological changes: 'steam power and iron smelted with coal through the 1830s; industrial chemicals, cheap steel, and electricity from the 1830s through the 1890s; the internal combustion engine, powered flight, and electronics during the first half of the new century; and then the blessings of nuclear technology, jet propulsion, rocketry, semiconductors, lasers, composite materials, and primitive thinking machines.' Knox, 'Conclusion: Continuity and revolution in the making of strategy', p. 639.

¹⁸² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 145.

¹⁸³ Black, *Global Military History*, p. 271.

¹⁸⁴ Gray, *Bloody*, p. 374.

¹⁸⁵ Gray, 'Why is strategy so difficult?', *Joint Force Quarterly*, Summer 1999, p. 9.

¹⁸⁶ Black, *Disorder*, p. 9.

such technology will not provide independent solutions to strategic problems as some commentators predict.

Geographical context

Within the geographical dimension of context we include, first, such factors as the location, size, and features of political entities and their geopolitical relation to one another. Second, it encompasses the various spatial dimensions within which war is fought, which have radically expanded over the last two centuries – initially being confined to either land or sea, commanders now have to cope with war in the air, space, and even cyber space.¹⁸⁷ These developments – the consequences of technological change – have undoubtedly rendered modern warfare more geographically diverse and complex. Clausewitz observes that ‘a commander must submit his work to a partner, space...which because of the constant movement and change to which he is subject he can never really come to know.’¹⁸⁸ Third, the physical environment, including terrain, topography, and the weather are all geographical factors that greatly impinge on the character and course of war. Clausewitz notes that ‘combat uninfluenced by its surroundings and the nature of the ground is hardly conceivable.’¹⁸⁹

The simple fact of a nation’s location can have crucial strategic and geopolitical implications: as Gray notes, ‘Geography is destiny.’¹⁹⁰ A state’s location can greatly shape its strategic culture or tactical doctrine: consider the different imperatives faced by a continental state such as Germany and an island nation like Great Britain.¹⁹¹ The size of a nation may have crucial implications – for example, the vast Russian hinterland enabled resistance against both

¹⁸⁷ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 40.

¹⁸⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 127.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁹⁰ Gray, *Bloody Century*, p. 75.

¹⁹¹ Murray and Grimsley note how British and German air power doctrine differed in the 1920s and 1930s primarily due to geographical considerations. Britain viewed air power as an independent and decisive instrument, whereas Germany placed more emphasis on the its supportive role in a ground war. This largely owed to Germany’s preoccupation with the threat of invasion by land, which, if it occurred may have resulted in the loss of its airfields making any putative strategic bombing campaign impossible; a threat Britain, protected by the Channel, had less cause to be concerned about. Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, ‘Introduction: On Strategy’, in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (eds.), *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 8.

Napoleon and then Hitler by ‘trading space for time in a protracted defence.’¹⁹² Also, guerrillas and terrorists seek to exploit geography by remaining highly mobile and not being tied to specific locations, although of course they cannot exist outside of geography and they generally require some form of base, be it the jungle hide-out of the Cuban revolutionaries or the inner-city loft-space of the F.L.N. during the Battle of Algiers. Al-Qaeda’s leadership have managed to evade being captured or killed by US special forces through exploitation of the geopolitical features of the mountainous border area straddling Afghanistan and Pakistan, with its cave complexes surrounded by broadly sympathetic local Islamist tribes.

Weather, terrain, and other elements of the environment can be ‘capricious, disadvantageous, fortuitous, formidable, opportune, problematic, and risk-inducing.’¹⁹³ Of course, for most of history the nature of the seasons, the need for soldiers to help with the harvest, combined with the constraints of existing transportation, restricted campaigns to a few months of the year, but the elements have had a more direct impact on war. Indeed, weather extremes have been responsible for some of history’s most notable events in war: the ‘Divine Wind’ which twice denied the Mongols conquest of Japan; Napoleon’s horrific crossing of the thawing Berezina River in 1812; General Burnside’s abortive ‘Mud March’ of 1863;¹⁹⁴ and the Russian winter which essentially saved the Soviet Union in 1941 – indeed, Hitler believed he might have been victorious had he attacked five weeks earlier in May 1941 thus gaining himself longer before the snows set in.¹⁹⁵ Such environmental factors are difficult to predict except in general terms; history certainly suggests commanders should expect the unexpected.¹⁹⁶ Some aspects of the topographical context are naturally occurring, such as rivers and mountains, whilst others might be man-made, in particular in the form of fortifications, barriers, and walls of various

¹⁹² Murray and Grimsley, ‘On Strategy’, p. 9.

¹⁹³ Harold A. Winters, *Battling the Elements: Weather and Terrain in the Conduct of War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 266.

¹⁹⁴ Following the Confederate victory at Fredericksburg in December 1862, Burnside was in desperate need of a victory and so he determined to take Richmond, however his troops became literally bogged down in mud leading to the failure of the operation. Burnside subsequently resigned. Susan-Mary Grant, *The War for a Nation: The American Civil War* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 146-51.

¹⁹⁵ Overy, *Allies*, p. 314.

¹⁹⁶ Winters, *Battling the Elements*, p. 268.

descriptions.¹⁹⁷ Technology has of course been used to overcome some of the more limiting effects of war's geographical dimensions, whether through specialised equipment and vehicles,¹⁹⁸ long-range weapons delivery systems, advanced communications, or modern strategic lift capabilities.¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, geographical dimensions remain an ever-present influence: 'time and distance and weather still exercise enormous influence on the strategic options and capabilities of states.'²⁰⁰ So, as Clausewitz noted, commanders require great imagination to be able to comprehend the manifold dimensions of their spatial and geographical context.²⁰¹

Reflections

As MacGregor Knox has highlighted, human history in the last few centuries has undergone a profound transition from the 'cyclical quasistagnation of the agrarian age to the permanent revolution of science, technology, and industry.'²⁰² These momentous changes have certainly transformed, and continue to, the conditions within which war is conducted at a seemingly accelerating rate. In this chapter we have sought to provide a general theoretical overview of the nature, dynamics, and forms that this changeable context can take. The processes are too vast, inherently varied, and endlessly changeable to enable any detailed description of its substantive features in the space available, and it is in the nature of the concept that it allows of concrete analysis only in relation to the particular. Rather, we have been concerned with grasping its importance at a

¹⁹⁷ Some of the most famous examples of the latter would include the Great Wall of China built to keep out Mongol hordes, Mohammed's ditch at Medina, the ill-fated French Maginot Line, the Maurice Line constructed by the French to keep out F.L.N. fighters based in Tunisia, the Israel Security Barrier, and perhaps most recently, the Baghdad security wall built to lessen Sunni and Shia sectarian conflict.

¹⁹⁸ Such as those numerous specialised vehicles and contraptions developed for the Normandy Landings of 1944.

¹⁹⁹ McInnes notes how during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, 'Geographical limitations were overcome by improvements in transportation, enabling armies of hundreds of thousands to be moved and supplied over large distances. Communications technology allowed operational commanders to remain in control despite the battlefield stretching over hundreds of miles.' McInnes, *Spectator-Sport Warfare*, p. 51.

²⁰⁰ Murray and Grimsley, 'On Strategy', p. 9.

²⁰¹ Clausewitz discusses this idea in his Chapter on genius in relation to what he calls the 'sense of locality'. Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 127-28. The Confederate commander General Robert E. Lee is famed for his genius in this regard. See Cyril Falls, *A Hundred Years of War, 1850-1950* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 69.

²⁰² Knox, 'Conclusion: Continuity and revolution in the making of strategy', p. 615.

theoretical level as an overarching, shaping influence on the forms that war can take, but which leave the essential nature of war in Clausewitz's conception relatively undisturbed. We concur with Knox that Clausewitz's central insights, primarily as enshrined in the trinity, have stood the test of the great changes that have taken place in all the dimensions of war's contexts.

These explorations into some of the prominent contextual dimensions have important implications for our understanding of the trinity. In order to fully understand the operation and meaning of the different elements and levels of the trinity we need to firmly anchor the concept of context to the theoretical framework. As argued above, the idea of context is already present in Clausewitz's trinity, but in a somewhat diffuse, unclear, and hidden form. This has caused much misunderstanding and a failure to appreciate the important and in-built idea of *change* within the parameters of his theory. A number of commentators have noted the inherent flexibility or elasticity of the trinity, and this is best understood when we bring together Clausewitz's conception of the essential nature of war with the idea of context.

It is through the dynamic play of variable conditions on actors in war that explains the infinitely changeable character or manifestation of the three central primary elements of war's nature at the secondary, subjective level. As Gray notes, 'Naturally...the social, political, and even ethical, contexts are ever influx. But...that fact poses no real difficulty for Clausewitz's theory of war.'²⁰³ By bringing context firmly 'back in', we can better unleash the explanative potential in the trinity. Context might best be conceived as forming a tertiary level in the framework. It needs to be stressed that what is being suggested is not something that would have been alien to Clausewitz; in fact, we have already demonstrated how the idea of context was integral to his theorising on war and constitutes a major feature of the trinity as expressed through the chameleon metaphor.

Context, as an operative element of the trinity, should be conceived of as an ever-present multifaceted web, comprised of a number of differing interconnected dimensions that interact over time. Context surrounds war but is also reciprocally and mutually dependent on the behaviour of actors and the development of events. The dimensions of context change over time in myriad

²⁰³ Colin S. Gray, 'Clausewitz, History, and the Future Strategic World', *The Occasional*, No. 47, June 2003, p. 6.

ways, sometimes with a profound impact on the conduct of war that may be said to amount to a 'military revolution'. War itself is a major factor working to shape the dimensions of context over time: as Gray notes 'warfare has to be thought of as an integral part of, at least as the major shaping influence upon, those contexts.'²⁰⁴

That Clausewitz emphasised the importance of unique conditions in war does not mean that he believed no generalisable insights could be extracted from history. It did, however, certainly play a moderating role in the formulation of his theory. His recognition of contextual particularism protected his theory from limited and one-sided conclusions and led him to establish a high threshold for those aspects of the nature of war that can be held to be truly universal. Context, properly understood, is not part of the nature of war itself, but that nature, as expressed in the trinity, cannot be understood without reference to context, as it helps us explain why war's nature manifests itself in divergent ways throughout history. Or as Gray has put it, although change 'in the distribution of power, in the political culture of key polities, in the technological and economic contexts, and so forth – matters, it does not matter to the degree that it can transform the nature of the subject.'²⁰⁵ The nature of war can never be considered without reference to context because all wars necessarily take place within specific contexts, that greatly shape their course, character, and outcomes. As Clausewitz stated, 'we must face the fact that war and its forms results from ideas, emotions, and conditions prevailing at the time.'²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ Gray, *Bloody Century*, pp. 56-57.

²⁰⁵ Gray, 'Clausewitz rules', pp. 181-82.

²⁰⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 702.

CHAPTER FOUR

Policy: War as an Instrument

Politics is war without bloodshed while war is politics with bloodshed.¹

Mao Tse-Tung

No one is forced into war by ignorance, nor, if he thinks he will gain from it, is he kept out by fear. The fact is that one side thinks that the profits to be won outweigh the risks to be incurred, and the other side is ready to face danger rather than accept an immediate loss.²

Thucydides

This chapter is the first of the three core chapters of the thesis which explore, in turn, the individual elements of the primary trinity: politics, chance, and passion.

Many commentators suggest that Clausewitz thought war was entirely governed by reason and controlled by the dictates of policy or ‘interest’. According to Creveld, Clausewitz viewed war as little more than a ‘rational instrument for the attainment of rational social ends.’³ Jan Angstrom notes that ‘Clausewitz asserted that war is a rational and political phenomenon.’⁴ Booth has described a Clausewitzian ‘political philosophy of war’ which is purely rational and instrumental.⁵ Barbara Ehrenreich begins her study of passion in war by stating that Clausewitz saw ‘war itself as an entirely rational undertaking, unsullied by human emotion.’⁶ Furthermore, she suggests Clausewitz believed policy itself resulted ‘from the same kind of clearheaded deliberation one might

¹ Quoted in Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 47.

² Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 299.

³ Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 179. This accusation is repeated in his *The Culture of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008).

⁴ Jan Angstrom, ‘Introduction: Debating the nature of modern war’, in Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Jan Angstrom, (eds.), *Rethinking the Nature of War* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 4.

⁵ See Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 74, and Anatol Rapoport, ‘Editor’s Introduction’, in Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham and ed. F. N. Maude (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 13. According to Booth, Clausewitz bears a large part of the responsibility for constructing the dangerously distorting idea of the ‘rational Strategic Man’, pp. 17-18.

⁶ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: A History of Passion in War* (St Ives: Virago, 1998), p. 7.

apply to a game of chess.’⁷ Even proponents of Clausewitz are guilty of overplaying this aspect of his thought, through attempts to transform his insights into ‘normative doctrine’⁸ and overemphasising the role rational policy plays in his theory.

These interpretations contain seeds of truth, but only to a point. The idea of rationality is clearly expressed in the trinity when Clausewitz states that war is composed of ‘an element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.’⁹ Regardless of the misleading translation of this sentence,¹⁰ how could an author who had witnessed first-hand the horrors and brutality of war, such as Napoleon’s dreadful retreat across the Berezina, and who had seen his government adopt and cling to such misconceived policies, come to such a seemingly cold and rigid conclusion? It is not so much answering such questions that is important, but rather revealing the mistaken assumptions regarding Clausewitz’s ideas upon which they are based.

Undoubtedly Clausewitz stressed the importance of policy and reason in war and there is strong evidence to suggest, had he lived longer, these ideas would have attained a more prominent role.¹¹ Also, it cannot be doubted that Clausewitz thought, in both a moral and didactic sense, that the use of force *ought* to be subordinated to policy. Yet, these assertions, viewed outside of their proper context, would greatly distort Clausewitz’s contribution. Clausewitz’s ideas are more nuanced and complex than any crude depictions of strict political rationalism would suggest. Even a cursory acquaintance with his work would reveal the prominent role that emotional and contingent factors play in his holistic theory. With such ideas in mind, no doubt Clausewitz would be in sympathy with Spinoza’s view that those who think men ‘can ever be induced to live according to the bare dictate of reason, must be dreaming of the poetic

⁷ Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites*, p. 7.

⁸ Antulio Echevarria, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 85.

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. 101. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Christopher Bassford suggests the sentence should read: ‘pure reason’. ‘Reason alone’ is clearly inaccurate because there are clearly two other dimensions of war in the trinity. ‘Pure reason’ suggests a certain type of behaviour, but this is very different from saying reason is the *only* force that war is subordinated to. Christopher Bassford, ‘The Primacy of Policy and the ‘Trinity’ in Clausewitz’s Mature Thought’, in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 77.

¹¹ Carl von Clausewitz, ‘Note of 10 July 1827’, in Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 77-78.

golden age, or of a stage-play.¹² Indeed, Clausewitz believed that logic often came to a stop in the great labyrinth of war.¹³ There is no simple explanation of the manner in which the political element fits into his theory; no formulaic or linear characterisation will suffice.

Yet, far from simply dismissing the critiques of Clausewitz in this area, the counter-arguments must be taken seriously. Only by considering these alternative perspectives can we arrive at a thorough understanding of war's nature. As this chapter will show, ideas of politics, policy, and reason hold a number of differing implications in terms of their relationship to one another and their influence on war. Moreover, the terms under discussion are themselves deeply complex and contested. We must seek to understand better the ways in which these ideas developed in Clausewitz's thought, how he perceived them, and the way in which he believed they operated in relation to war. The political aspect of war is vital to his theory and any true understanding of the trinity requires a detailed understanding of this tendency and its relation to the whole.

Part of the reason for misinterpretations relating to this tendency is the complexity of the subject itself, combined with its somewhat limited, disjointed, and contradictory presentation in *On War*. Indeed, Gray has noted that this is a major weakness of the work.¹⁴ This may be surprising to some given the clear importance he attached to the idea, the emphasis placed on it by his critics, and the fact that it now usually defines Clausewitz's modern relevance. We must acknowledge and seek to rectify the somewhat insufficient consideration he gave to this subject.¹⁵ These deficiencies may in part be due to his untimely death, but we must also recognise his work for what it is and accept that it is not wholly satisfactory in its explication of this subject. This is cause for a detailed analysis of the text, the logic of his thought on this subject, and the implications of his ideas in the light of history and contemporary scholarship. Regardless of the deficiencies outlined above, Clausewitz certainly provides us with a strong foundation for further exploration of the subject.

¹² Spinoza quoted in Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War: a theoretical analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 24.

¹³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 701.

¹⁴ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 102.

¹⁵ Clausewitz's conception of policy is limited and, as Echevarria has argued, strongly deterministic. Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 91-93.

In this chapter we consider some of the major influences on his thought relating to this subject. This will provide the basis for a more detailed exploration in the second section. Then we discuss some of the theoretical implications deriving from the preceding analysis.

Background, influences and precedents

Determining the specific influences that inspired and led Clausewitz to his insights with regard to this tendency is a difficult matter, not least due to the varied ways in which it can be interpreted. However, this is not a futile task as there are indubitably a number of crucial factors which contributed to Clausewitz's thoughts. The purpose here is not to propose any direct correlation or deterministic causality between these factors and Clausewitz ideas. Rather, we will explore, in a somewhat impressionistic manner, a number of areas and suggest ways in which Clausewitz was perhaps guided in his thinking by the broad intellectual climate, existing ideas, and his observations on the events of the day, some of which he was directly involved in.

Clausewitz's precursors

Given that today the name of Clausewitz is almost synonymous with the idea of war as an instrument of policy, it is easy to overlook the fact that a number of theorists prior to and contemporary with Clausewitz had contemplated war's connection with politics, often in ways which closely prefigured Clausewitz. The notion that war was related to the realm of politics was not an original idea, nor one that, at a basic level, was particularly shocking.¹⁶ Smith has noted that, 'the idea of war as an instrument of policy is most closely associated with Clausewitz but was already familiar in the eighteenth century.'¹⁷ Clausewitz himself explicitly accepts that the idea was more or less common-knowledge when he stated, '*It is of course well-known* that the only source of war is politics

¹⁶ Paret notes that, 'Everyone recognised that wars were fought not for their own sake but for a political purpose.' Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993), p. 19.

¹⁷ Hugh Smith, *On Clausewitz* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 100.

– the intercourse of governments and peoples.’¹⁸ Echevarria notes that the contemporary Prussian *Officer’s Handbook* written by August Rühle von Lilienstern had it that ‘war as a whole always has an ultimate political purpose’, it is, in fact, undertaken ‘to realize the political purpose upon which the state decided in view of the nation’s internal and external conditions.’¹⁹

Earlier Enlightenment military theorists had focused almost exclusively on strictly military matters, considering war a subject area worthy of study as a separate discipline from that of politics – as a discrete and bounded system – yet this is not to suggest they were unaware of connections between the two. Moreover, some theorists had begun to grasp at the ideas that Clausewitz would come to present in a more thorough manner. In this respect, Clausewitz was possessed of a relatively sturdy foundation of thought to draw upon: his ideas did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum. The fact that Clausewitz only truly determined the role of politics in war in his final years²⁰ is reason to wonder whether he could have reached those conclusions before his untimely death without such a foundation of existing ideas. This is only speculation, and Clausewitz’s ideas on the subject were shaped by other important factors. The point, however, is to emphasise that Clausewitz was not working from a *tabula rasa*, even if his ideas would go deeper than existing conceptions.

A theme which emerges from earlier theories is that war is treated as something that arises out of political situations, yet which – to adopt Clausewitz’s metaphor of politics as the ‘womb of war’²¹ – orphans its child and leaves it to its own fate. This perspective allowed thinkers to conclude that mastery of the art of war was vital if political interests were to be served, but they did not explore how one interacted with the other. Montecuccoli, for instance, thought it vital to develop the science of war because it was of the utmost political importance.²² The first book of his *Treatise on War* was devoted to an extensive study of the nature and political context of war and, for him, the purpose of war was a favourable peace – an idea common perhaps since

¹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 731. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Quoted in Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 90.

²⁰ This is disputed by some, who argue that he had recognised the importance of politics at an earlier stage. This may be the case, but the point here is that it is his insights in their mature, advanced, and complex form that are of most importance.

²¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 173.

²² Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 22.

Aristotle, in his *Ethics*, claimed that we ‘make war in order that we may live at peace.’²³ Similarly, Friedrich von Lossau, a reformer and member of the *Militarische Gesellschaft*, of which Clausewitz was a member, held that, ‘Wars are therefore the exterior means of states to achieve by violence what they cannot achieve by peaceful means.’²⁴

Of Clausewitz’s contemporaries, Jomini was perhaps the most developed in his understanding on this subject. At the beginning of his *Art of War* we are presented with a typology of war as shaped by distinctive political conditions and motives.²⁵ Yet, the extent of Jomini’s observations on the impact of policy was that ‘these different kinds of war influence in some degree the nature and extent of the efforts and operations necessary for the proposed end.’²⁶ Jomini’s discussion appears to offer a route into deeper analysis, yet this promise fades and the influence of politics is largely absent from his subsequent theory despite some partial, oblique, and anecdotal references: the autonomy of the military sphere is emphasised. As Clausewitz held, knowledge of political ‘type’ might certainly help us understand individual wars, but is of little use to general theory, other than to show that there are indeed many different forms of political motivation that give rise to war. In Jomini, as in the work of earlier thinkers, we do not see the same level of depth and intricacy, as regards the relationship between politics and war, that we do in Clausewitz.

²³ He goes on to state, ‘nobody chooses to make war or provokes it for the sake of making war; a man would be regarded as a bloodthirsty monster if he made his friends into enemies in order to bring about battles and slaughter.’ Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 329.

²⁴ Quoted in Smith, *On Clausewitz*, p. 100.

²⁵ He states that a government goes to war: to reclaim certain rights or to defend them; to protect and maintain the great interests of the state, as commerce, manufactures, or agriculture; to uphold neighbouring states whose existence is necessary either for the safety of the government or the balance of power; to fulfill the obligations of offensive and defensive alliances; to propagate political or religious theories, to crush them out, or to defend them; to increase the influence and power of the state by acquisitions of territory; to defend the threatened independence of the state; to avenge insulted honor; or, from a mania for conquest. He then provides greater detail on: offensive wars to reclaim rights; politically defensive wars; wars of expediency; wars with or without allies; wars of intervention; wars of conquest; wars of opinion; national wars; civil wars and wars of religion; and double wars. Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G. H. Mendell, and W. P. Craighill (Texas: El Paso Norte Press, 2005), pp. 10-29.

²⁶ He goes on to state that ‘two hundred thousand French wishing to subjugate the Spanish people, united to a man against them, would not manoeuvre as the same number of French in a march upon Vienna, or any other capital, to compel a peace.’ The implication being that political ‘circumstances and events’ have some shaping effect on the nature of the campaign. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

Accepting what *is* contained in these thinkers works with respect to the relationship, they can be clearly distinguished from Clausewitz in three important respects: they generally treat war as an autonomous phenomenon capable of study in its own right; following from this, they do not explore the nature of the relationship and *dynamic interaction* between the two in any great detail; and finally, whilst groping towards the instrumental nature of war they do not explore the implications of this insight in terms of broader strategic and military matters.

Machiavelli and the realist tradition

Apart from contemporaneous thought on these matters, there was another rich vein of thought that had a much deeper lineage and which impressed Clausewitz greatly. This was the broad tradition of, what we now know as classical realism, whose pre-eminent figures were Thucydides and Machiavelli, and which represented a powerful body of thought within which the use of force in political affairs was a principal concern. Whilst there is no direct evidence of Clausewitz's familiarity with Thucydides,²⁷ his fascination with Machiavelli is undoubted. We will thus explore Clausewitz's debt to this tradition through the prism of Machiavelli's writings.

Machiavelli's belief that war is essentially a branch of politics²⁸ greatly impressed Clausewitz.²⁹ The great Florentine, along with other thinkers in the realist mould, emphasised the idea that war was an inescapable feature of the relations between political communities in a hostile environment which resembled the imagined human state of nature, where each was compelled to fend for itself in the absence of an overarching authority and where, in the interest of security and self-preservation, others must eternally be considered as potential threats.³⁰ Likewise, Clausewitz – in a way which clearly distanced him

²⁷ Although aspects of Clausewitz's thought certainly strongly reflect the influence of Thucydides, suggesting perhaps that he had read his work.

²⁸ Jay Luvaas, 'The Great Military Historians and Philosophers', in John E. Jessop and Robert W. Coakley, *A Guide to the Study and Use of Military History* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1988), p. 8.

²⁹ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (London: Cassell & Company Ltd, 1974), p. 438.

³⁰ As Boucher put it, realists hold that 'no ultimate authority possesses the requisite power to enforce compliance with rules of conduct, states pursue their own interest in a sphere devoid of justice... Fear and distrust of other states provide the motive for increasing one's own power by prosecuting wars to subdue those who when the scales change will seek to subdue you.' David

from the idealist Kantian conception of *Perpetual Peace*³¹ – ‘firmly believed...that the international arena was dominated by the behaviour of sovereign states guided by considerations of *raison d’etat* in which power played the major role.’³² This was the basic reason for Clausewitz’s ‘affinity with a writer who insisted that, above all, the state was an institution created and maintained by the realistic use of force.’³³ In Machiavelli’s writings war is presented as an instrument; one of the occasionally vital means which states employ to attain their ends.

Machiavelli wrote at a time of great political and military turbulence – somewhat akin to that faced by Prussia in the early nineteenth century – when the established patterns of Italian politics were under threat from both internal and external forces.³⁴ For both Machiavelli and Clausewitz the priority for the government was positive action to ensure the security of the state and stability in its relations with other states, which could only be achieved through a combination of astute political manoeuvring and maintaining military effectiveness. Although Clausewitz did not follow Machiavelli in his somewhat brutal principles for consolidating domestic authority,³⁵ he certainly accepted that governments must be prepared to use force (involving any means necessary) to ensure their security and independence when threatened by external forces. Machiavelli, drawing on classical texts, held that military success was greatly dependent on political conditions: a democratic civil society could produce a citizen army – as opposed to a professional mercenary force – with superior morale and spirit, hence increased battlefield effectiveness (a vital precondition for the security of the state). Citizens’ experience of fighting for the community would, in turn, strengthen the virtuous bonds of civic republican unity. For

Boucher, *Political Theories of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 30.

³¹ Immanuel Kant, ‘Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch’, in Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 93-130.

³² Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 246.

³³ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 172.

³⁴ Internally in the shape of the rise of the influence anti-republican Medici family in Florence and externally in France’s quest for supremacy in Italy.

³⁵ In a note Clausewitz states that, ‘What he says about the prince’s policies toward their subjects is certainly largely outdated, because political forms have changed considerably since his time’, Carl von Clausewitz, ‘Notes on History and Politics’, in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Paret, Peter and Moran, Daniel (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 268.

Machiavelli, the good of the state and military effectiveness, politics and war, were intricately entwined in a virtuous dialectical relationship.³⁶ Clausewitz strongly sympathised with the idea that politics and war could be mutually supportive in this way.³⁷

What is fascinating, is that in juxtaposing Machiavelli and Clausewitz we have a diplomat profoundly interested in military affairs and a soldier profoundly concerned with political issues. This powerfully conveys the necessary relationship between the two: that two of the most penetrating minds of the last five hundred years felt the need to master both subjects regardless of their professional position, tells us a great deal about their inherent connection: one cannot fully comprehend one without an grasp of the other.

The classical realist tradition certainly provided the broad intellectual parameters in which Clausewitz's more detailed exploration of the nature of the relationship between war and politics could coalesce. Reading the works of such thinkers allowed him to conceive of war from the perspective of politics and to contemplate its implications. In particular, Machiavelli provided Clausewitz with profound insights into, not only why war is an inescapable feature of relationships between independent groups, but of the more subtle interconnections between civil and military affairs. Yet, whilst war had been a central concern of such thinkers, there was a limit to their thought on the subject. Their emphasis had been on the political conditions which make war an inevitability and why it should be seen as a necessary instrument of policy. Despite Machiavelli's extensive writing on military affairs – most significantly in *The Art of War* – he treats the actual conduct of war in a largely autonomous manner and his emphasis was on the political implications of military affairs. Clausewitz's analysis approached the subject from the reverse perspective: he endeavoured to understand how politics impacted on war.

³⁶ Neal Wood, 'Introduction' in Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, trans. Ellis Farnsworth (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001), pp. xlvii-liii.

³⁷ Clausewitz expressed a belief in the strong relationship between civil and military affairs in his letter to Fichte on Machiavelli. He suggests a virtuous circle where improving 'civil conditions, which are a matter of political arrangements', provides the necessary basis for military reform, and inspires individual energies in the individuals fighting for their state so they are not reduced to mere automata. Civilians fighting for the state will also become better civilians for the experience. Carl von Clausewitz, 'Letter to Fichte', in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, pp. 282-83.

Events of the day, experiences, and historical analysis

That political factors were a running concern for Clausewitz can partly be attributed to the ideas contained in some of the existing works on military theory, but additionally we cannot discount Clausewitz's own experiences and his interpretations of the events of his lifetime as important influences. As Brodie observes, in this sense he certainly 'had some bitter and extraordinary personal experiences to help him along the way.'³⁸ Combined with his historical analyses,³⁹ Clausewitz began to see more clearly the nature of the interaction between war and politics. From his earliest studies to *On War*, Clausewitz had always recognised the importance of politics, but the final prominent place it would attain in his theoretical framework occurred only later.

From an early age Clausewitz had seen how military effectiveness could be fatally undermined without the correct political basis. At thirteen he witnessed the failure of the First Coalition to follow up the successful siege of Mainz 1793 due to 'Prusso-Austrian political arguments',⁴⁰ he observed the timid and irresolute Frederick William II pass up the opportunity of joining the Second Coalition,⁴¹ and later, in 1805 Clausewitz saw the new sovereign, King Frederick William III, cling to his neutrality while Napoleon, in the campaign culminating with Austerlitz, defeated Austria and Russia. Finding himself facing Napoleon alone, the king could not accept the Emperor's new demands and foolishly declared war. If the king had read the political situation correctly, timely action in union with Austria and Russia may have averted the calamity of 1806. But, the political failure ran deeper than that. The inadequacies that would be revealed on the battlefields of Jena and Auerstedt in 1806 were not purely military, but resulted from a failure to recognise changed political conditions and adapt appropriately. Prussia did not fully appreciate the nature of the political and military consequences of the Revolution in France, particularly with regard

³⁸ Brodie, *War and Politics*, p. 441.

³⁹ Herberg-Rothe has argued this to be the most important factor accounting for the ideas he developed on the subject. Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz's Puzzle: The Political Theory of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴⁰ Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), p. 27

⁴¹ Napoleon remarked that, 'As a private citizen, the King of Prussia is a loyal, good and honest man, but in his political capacity, he is a man by nature governed by necessity who is at the mercy of anyone who is possessed of force and is prepared to raise his hand.' Quoted in Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 85.

to the new vigour and energy it instilled in its armed forces. Prussia went to war with an army perhaps suited to a form of limited Frederickan war, yet entirely unsuited to facing the 'untrammelled' war practised by Napoleon.⁴² Clausewitz asks 'would a purely military view of war have enabled anyone to detect these faults and cure them? It would not.'⁴³

More generally, over the course of Napoleonic period, Clausewitz could observe how the states of Europe had individually and repeatedly failed to achieve anything like the political unity and cohesion that could have delivered strategic success. Meanwhile, Napoleon had certainly provided Clausewitz with a master-class in employing the instrument of war to secure political power, and of reading the intentions and interests of his enemies to play them off against one another. Yet, paradoxically, it was Napoleon's ultimate strategic failure, culminating in Waterloo, which provided Clausewitz with the clearest example of the importance of politics. His stunning military victories may have allowed him to dominate vast swathes of Europe, but his ultimate failure was political.⁴⁴

Napoleon's battlefield victories were never politically decisive enough to lay the foundations for a lasting peace. Regardless of his military genius, his policy objectives were unrealistic and he failed to understand that peace must be accepted by the military defeated, otherwise there always remains the potential for renewed resistance. As Clausewitz stated, the 'defeated state often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil, for which some remedy may still be found in political conditions at a later date.'⁴⁵ Napoleon refused compromise settlements⁴⁶ and he never grasped that it was insufficient to simply dictate peace

⁴² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 717.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 736.

⁴⁴ Gray concludes that overall his strategic performance was 'a colossal failure.' Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 7, 39-40, and 46.

⁴⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89. Following the Battle of Waterloo, Clausewitz was a voice of moderation urging restraint in their dealings with the defeated French, aware that this was indispensable for a lasting peace. In a letter to his wife he wrote that, 'I dislike this position of having my foot upon someone's neck...Historically the English will play a better role in this catastrophe, because they do not seem to have come here with a passion for revenge and for settling old scores, but rather like a master who wishes to discipline with proud coldness and immaculate purity.' Quoted in Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 287.

⁴⁶ Esdaile notes that the period around 1800 would have been a particularly conducive time for Napoleon to craft a negotiated peace. Many of the other great powers had not at that point irrevocably decided on the necessity for the complete overthrow of Napoleon even though there were powerful interests who desired it. His only enemies at the time were Britain and Austria, both with limited commitment to the struggle. Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, pp. 77-109.

terms,⁴⁷ short of imposing a ‘Carthaginian Peace’ on his enemies.⁴⁸ European statesmen came to realise that coexistence with Napoleon was impossible; he had to be defeated by politically united military action.⁴⁹ So, embedded in his great military victories were the seeds of his own downfall.⁵⁰ Clausewitz could of course contrast the Napoleonic performance with the example of Frederick the Great who was capable of extreme vigour when necessary, but was then content to revert back to ‘a state of calm oscillation, always ready to adjust to the smallest shift in the political situation.’⁵¹ This led Clausewitz to conclude that an essential element of military genius was a ‘thorough grasp of national policy’ whereby the commander ‘is aware of the entire political situation’ and also ‘knows exactly how much he can achieve with the means at his disposal.’⁵²

Recognition of the importance of politics is also reflected in Clausewitz’s historical works from an early age. His scholarly professionalism and desire for objectivity compelled him to always trace events back to their prominent causes; to follow the threads of action back to their original motive. In Book 2, Chapter 5 of *On War* he notes that ‘a means may be evaluated, not merely with respect to its immediate end: that end itself should be appraised as a means for the next and higher one...In many cases, particularly those involving great and decisive actions, the analysis must extend to the *ultimate objective*, which is to bring

⁴⁷ Napoleon could have taken a lesson from the eighteenth century jurist Emmerich de Vattel who noted that, ‘If an unjust and rapacious conqueror subdues a nation, and forces her to accept hard, ignominious, and insupportable conditions, necessity obliges her to submit: but this apparent tranquillity is not peace; it is an oppression which she endures only so long as she wants the means of shaking it off, and against which men of spirit rise on the first favourable opportunity.’ Quoted in J. F. C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War 1789-1961* (New Jersey: Da Capo Press, 1992), pp. 19-20. Clausewitz expressed much the same sentiment when he held that outcomes in war are never final and ‘for which a remedy may be found in political conditions at some later date.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89. This was the weakness of the Versailles settlement of 1919. As Gray notes, ‘The problem...was that in deadly fashion it combined elements of humiliation of the vanquished – who were not convinced that they were properly vanquished – with an unrealistic requirement for robust postwar ‘ordering’ on the part of the victors.’ Colin S. Gray, ‘Clausewitz rules, OK? The future is the past – with GPS’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, 1999, p. 176.

⁴⁸ Gray, ‘Clausewitz rules’, p. 175-76. As he notes such a ‘Carthaginian Peace’ can only work ‘provided it truly is ‘Carthaginian’.

⁴⁹ The Allies only demanded regime change late in the day. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations*, p. 47.

⁵⁰ Esdaile, *Napoleon’s Wars*, p. 109.

⁵¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 210.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 130. These are talents of course that have been notably absent in many military commanders throughout history. This feeds into problems relating to civil-military relations, but the basic point stands. Those responsible for achieving military success require more than just military expertise; they also require political understanding of how their success will contribute to the desired political outcome.

about peace.’⁵³ Consequently, his numerous campaign analyses were inevitably drawn away from tactical matters toward fundamental political problems, and he always kept the political elements basic to every conflict steadily in view in all his strategic historical analyses.⁵⁴ Through this process of intense historical study, Clausewitz would time and again be forced to contemplate the extent to which military events, engagements won and lost, or issues pertaining to military administration were often decided or at least influenced by political considerations. These analyses provided Clausewitz with a rich empirical basis on which to develop his ideas in a more theoretical fashion.

Explorations

So, through the ideas of earlier theorists, his own direct experiences, historical analysis, and his reading of the events of the age, Clausewitz came to understand that politics was inextricably intertwined with the use of force, and that their connection could not be overlooked in theory: but how exactly were they related? His theoretical antecedents had grasped at the linkages, but failed to follow them through or adequately incorporate them into their systems. From an early age, Clausewitz had, sometimes in extremely personal ways, come face to face with the interaction between politics and war, and expressed his personal political views on the pressing concerns of the day in forcible terms.⁵⁵ But, how did Clausewitz take these ideas forward in his theoretical work, what concepts and methods did he employ to tackle the subject, and what were the precise meanings he attached to these issues? The following sections will explore these problems in more detail.

The overriding focus of Clausewitz’s studies was, of course, that activity to which his whole professional life had been devoted: war.⁵⁶ This fact, as with other military theorists, often precluded detailed study of subjects seemingly

⁵³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 184.

⁵⁴ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 203.

⁵⁵ Most notably in his ‘Political Declaration’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, pp. 287-303.

⁵⁶ As Honig notes, Clausewitz’s original aim in writing *On War* ‘was not to explain how the interrelationship between war and politics worked. Rather he wanted to analyse the inner workings of the phenomenon of war.’ Jan Willem Honig, ‘Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting’, in Gert de Nooy (ed.), *The Clausewitzian Dictum and the Future of Western Military Strategy* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997), p. 111.

beyond those of a distinctly military character. The closest Clausewitz came to a political appointment was his ultimately unsuccessful campaign to be appointed Prussian minister to the Court of St James in London⁵⁷ and his only diplomatic experience being the part he played in the Convention of Tauroggen, which successfully facilitated the defection of General Yorck from the French at the end of 1812. Nevertheless, Clausewitz could not help but be repeatedly drawn towards political issues and problems. As we have seen, this emanated in part from the crucial impact that political factors had on the military events of the day. Albeit a military man through and through, Clausewitz had a profoundly political mind, nurtured by a combination of factors: extensive study, discussions with knowledgeable acquaintances, detailed reflections on contemporary events, innumerable historical analyses, and deep involvement in both political and military affairs.⁵⁸ This is not to mention the simple fact of his 'abiding fascination with political issues and questions of foreign policy.'⁵⁹ If there was ever anyone well placed to explore the crucial relationship between war and politics, it was Clausewitz.⁶⁰

Politics and war in Clausewitz's thought

Any investigation into this subject requires a broad consideration of the place of Clausewitz's discussion of political matters in the text and the manner or method by which he arrived at his final conception. The actual structure of *On War* distorts our comprehension of this subject: there is no separate section devoted to politics and it was an aspect of war he intended to weave into the whole work

⁵⁷ See Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, pp. 304-05. Another chance of receiving a diplomatic post in Munich came to nothing. See also, Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993), pp. 178-90.

⁵⁸ Perhaps a key event for Clausewitz in this respect was his role in the signing of the important Convention of Tauroggen in December 1812, which brought General von Yorck and his 14,000 strong Prussian force (which had been part of the left wing of the *Grand Armée* under Macdonald operating in the Baltic region) back into the struggle against France. Clausewitz was the chief negotiator in this highly political charged diplomatic mission. The political impact was great as Yorck's decision, combined with the raising of a popular army, the *Landwehr* (also politically a highly unprecedented act in Prussia), eventually persuaded Frederick William to renounce his alliance with France on 16 March 1813. See Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, pp. 228-32.

⁵⁹ Paret, *Understanding*, p. 178.

⁶⁰ Paret has noted the irony that it was a soldier who would first explicitly lay down the political nature of war. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

had he lived to revise the text.⁶¹ However, Gat has provided us with an near definitive account of the development of his thought in this respect, so the matter will only be outlined in brief here.

As Paret has emphasised, the importance of politics was apparent in a rudimentary form in Clausewitz's earlier works, but it was not fully integrated in a more coherent manner until later.⁶² Gat argues that the crucial turning point came in 1827, basing this contention on the evidence of Clausewitz's note of that year.⁶³ In the note, Clausewitz introduced two related ideas: first, the idea of war being of two types, politically unlimited or limited, and second, that war was a continuation of policy by other means.⁶⁴ At the heart of the 'crisis' of 1827 was Clausewitz's need to reconcile his old conception of war – the 'annihilation of the enemy' – with the fact that, in reality wars do not always conform to this extreme. Initially, Clausewitz did not want to abandon his earlier concept, thus in Book 8, various factors *alien to the nature of war* are presented as explaining why war does not realise its true character⁶⁵ and there is a 'orientation towards the absolute form.'⁶⁶ Although at this point war is seen as a continuation of politics⁶⁷ and cannot be viewed as autonomous, politics is still not seen as part of the nature of war. However, Clausewitz realised that if politics was so important then the idea of absolute war appears to lose much of its point: the reality of the diversity of war conflicted too greatly with the absolute concept.

Book 1 attempts the reconciliation of this philosophical antinomy. Here, war that does not reach its extreme is no longer seen as a negative form and war does not rule of its own independent will; the aim of war is no longer necessarily

⁶¹ See Clausewitz, 'Note of 10 July 1827', p. 77-78.

⁶² Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, pp. 206-08.

⁶³ Likewise, Herberg-Rothe sees the 1827 note as reflecting a change of emphasis, but for somewhat different reasons. He believes it was the result of Clausewitz's historical studies rather than an enlightenment brought about by more deductive reasoning and Clausewitz's understanding of Hegel's dialectical method. Herberg-Rothe, *Puzzle*.

⁶⁴ Clausewitz, 'Note of 10 July 1827', in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 77.

⁶⁵ These are of two kinds, factors within war itself such as friction and external factors such as historical, political, and social conditions. See also Herberg-Rothe, *Puzzle*, p. 80, who believes that this correlates with Clausewitz's analysis of the Jena campaign where 'the theory of war had to be oriented towards the new way of waging war in order for it to correspond to reality' and the Russian campaign emphasised the external play of friction, pp. 80-81.

⁶⁶ The Napoleonic ideal is at the forefront of his conception at this point and largely explains why the absolute form is given priority. However, even Napoleon's way of war was not coterminous with absolute war as posited in theory – it is an abstraction. *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

⁶⁷ So, calculations of political probabilities, such as the shape of the political situation of the war, can serve to limit violence, but these, again, are primarily seen as external factors. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

the total overthrow of the enemy, but rather that demanded by policy.⁶⁸ Thus the reconciliation takes the form it does in Books 1 and 8: war ‘as a political and multi-faceted phenomenon is the unity that fuses the pure nature of war [absolute war], which constitutes merely a *partial understanding of reality*, with the political conditions and requirements.’⁶⁹ Limited wars are no longer deemed less genuine and there is no necessity for the escalation of force in every case.⁷⁰ Only by viewing war in this way – as politically conditioned – Clausewitz concludes, can all wars be conceived as things of the same nature, and this is ultimately expressed through the ‘remarkable trinity’.

Gat’s analysis is an invaluable resource with which to begin our analysis of Clausewitz’s ideas on this subject, but it is now our task to explore Clausewitz’s final conception in greater detail because its substantive elements are not fully explained in anything yet said. First, we must be clear as to the nature of the terms we are concerned with. This exploration of the dimensions of power and politics will also allow us to see more clearly how some commentators have misconceived what Clausewitz was trying to convey through this tendency.

Power, politics, and policy

As Bassford rightly points out, ‘telling students that war is an expression of X, without defining X, gets them nowhere.’⁷¹ Politics can mean different things to different people and it is true that Clausewitz never explicitly supplies a workable definition or firm guidance as to when and where he is differentiating between, what in English we would term, politics and policy, but which in German is covered by the single term, *politik*. This can lead to considerable confusion in our understanding, therefore it is necessary to provide more concrete conceptions of these terms. As Clausewitz believed, ‘Not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining

⁶⁸ Gat believes this reconciliation was made possible by Clausewitz’s borrowing from German idealist philosophy, elevated by Hegel, which sought to produce an all-encompassing explanation for the contradictions in reality through the use of dialectical reasoning. Gat, *Military Thought*, pp. 232-38.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 237.

⁷⁰ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 64.

⁷¹ Bassford, ‘The Primacy of Policy’, p. 83.

the question clearly and simply.’⁷² Clausewitz perhaps used the term ‘quite freely’ and it certainly conveys different, albeit often closely related meanings in different parts of the work. Understanding these distinctions is vital for grasping the meaning of *politik* as contained in the trinity and in its relation to other Clausewitzian concepts.

Politics, at base, is about relative power. The concept of power has become so overused as to almost render it devoid of meaning and it is too sensitive to be encapsulated by any succinct definition.⁷³ An excellent starting point however is provided by Howard who states that, ‘Power, in itself, is something morally neutral, being no more than the capacity of individuals and groups to control and organise their environment to conform with their physical requirements or their code of moral values.’⁷⁴ Politics is best conceived as a constant relational *process* whereby power is distributed within and between social groups. This process determines relative levels of influence that different actors have over others: it is the capacity to get others to do what you want and prevent them from doing what you do not want. As Bassford notes, it is in the nature of politics for it to be in constant and dynamic flux, ‘always involving give and take, interaction, competition, and struggle.’⁷⁵ This process can take many forms: it can be either predominantly material or psychological, coercive or persuasive, conflictual or consensual, or any mixture of these.⁷⁶ For instance, power can be secured through brute force, cultural values, religious edict, traditional authority, or established processes. In relations between politically sovereign groups – or international politics⁷⁷ – true political authority is rarely

⁷² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 152.

⁷³ Chris Brown, *Understanding International Relations* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 88-89.

⁷⁴ Michael Howard, ‘Military Power and International Relations’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1, January 2009, p. 149.

⁷⁵ Bassford, ‘Primacy of Policy’, p. 85.

⁷⁶ Carr notes that ‘the art of persuasion has always been a necessary part of the equipment of [the] political leader. Rhetoric has a long and honoured record in the annals of statesmanship.’ Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), p. 120.

⁷⁷ We must be careful using this term as it can be taken to be exclusively concerned with the intercourse of modern, legally sovereign states. Here we use it as a catch-all for the external relations of any politically organised collectivity. This is a view that is gaining ground in the discipline of International Relations over recent years as the importance of other actors on the world stage becomes increasingly apparent.

present, but this does not preclude peaceful, cooperative, or consensual forms of interaction.⁷⁸

Politics itself, understood as a ceaseless, multilateral, and changeable process of the distribution of relative power, is not a rational process in the sense of necessarily being geared towards some overall end, although it is comprised of individual actors seeking to achieve ends rationally. In terms of its application, power can be separated into those actions which seek to *compel* another to do something they otherwise would not have done or to *deter* them from doing what they would liked to have done.⁷⁹ Various tools can be used to achieve these results such as a combination of so-called ‘sticks and carrots’, and these can take more active or passive forms. So, power can be secured, generated, or expressed in countless ways, be it economic, diplomatic, legal, demographic, ideational, cultural or indeed, military. All elements of power are inherently intertwined and any realistic analysis must consider these factors simultaneously.⁸⁰

Whilst some elements of power are material and obvious, such as military hardware, others are deeply psychological and intangible. Estimations not only of others’ power, but of one’s own is fraught with difficulties. War is an activity which distributes power primarily through physical coercion, although effective military power, as Clausewitz well knew, is often reliant on non-material factors and complemented by other forms of power simultaneously. The quality of command, morale, doctrine, all greatly contribute to measures of actual capability.⁸¹ Power can also be greatly bolstered by other factors such as political alliances, personality,⁸² and credibility based on past behaviour, or even

⁷⁸ In modern liberal democracies, the power to shape the domestic context is secured through legitimate peaceful electoral contest. Such power is said to possess true ‘authority’ in the sense that others willingly comply and it is not reliant purely on force to maintain itself, whereas tyrannies are generally (though not necessarily always) characterised by an absence of authority, properly understood, to the extent that they depend on coercion to sustain their rule. Authority is primarily dependent upon the perceived legitimacy of the individual or institution holding power.

⁷⁹ Brown, *Understanding*, pp. 90-91.

⁸⁰ Particular political situations are differentiated by the extent to which they are about some of such factors more than others.

⁸¹ These points are argued in detail by Stephen Biddle in his *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸² Wellington remarked that Napoleon was worth a whole 40,000 men in the field. Peter Browning, *The Changing Nature of Warfare: The development of land warfare from 1792 to 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 32. The personality, or perhaps more accurately, the reputation of the commander can add to an army’s own strength by instilling courage in the troops or subtract from the enemy’s by inducing fear. Modern examples might include Robert E. Lee during the American Civil War or Erwin Rommel in the North African desert during World War II.

asymmetric sources of strength such as diplomatic and military surprise or the adoption of a defensive posture. Politics is thus a necessarily multifaceted, changeable, and complex phenomenon: a view strongly apparent in Clausewitz's work.

Even if one could freeze time and examine a particular group in isolation, no conclusive quantification of power would be possible. Moreover, it is precisely the relational nature of power that is most important – the attributes mentioned above have little meaning other than in relation to those against which it is directed.⁸³ These caveats do not render power any less real, they simply reveal its dialectical, mutable, and intangible features – all which help explain the complex and contingent nature of politics in general. This is particularly the case for entities in conditions of anarchy where, compared to an ordered domestic political context, the stabilising effect of law, legitimacy, and morality is less apparent. In the international arena, or when domestic political structures disintegrate, the use of force often becomes an ever-present possibility, if not a permanent reality and as Clausewitz recognised, 'certain self-imposed, imperceptible limitations hardly worth mentioning, known as international law and custom' scarcely ameliorate this condition.⁸⁴

Policy can be viewed as a particular actor's subjective orientation within this wider political realm. The two overlap where actions based on a particular policy become part of a political process by way of their interaction with other actors. Thus, while policy only truly has meaning in relation to wider circumstances, it also describes something particular by virtue of its being 'unilateral and rational' and to the extent that it represents 'a conscious effort by one entity in the political arena to bend its own power to the accomplishment of some purpose – some positive object, perhaps, or merely the continuation of its own power.'⁸⁵ Policy can of course, be 'at odds with politics'⁸⁶ to the extent that

⁸³ Brown, *Understanding*, p. 92.

⁸⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 83. Of course, such factors as law and custom *do* moderate the use of force to varying extents in differing contexts. To state the superiority of politics, *ceteris paribus*, is not to deny this. This was a position that Clausewitz shared with Machiavelli. They both believed that whilst ethical commitments did place important obligations on governments, they properly were considered as 'extraneous to fundamental political realities.' Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 172.

⁸⁵ Bassford, 'Primacy of Policy', p. 85. For instance, regarding the latter, it might be suggested that the overarching purpose of Napoleon's campaigns was to consolidate authority at home, which rested on that which had brought him to power: military victory. As Esdaile states, 'Victory on the battlefield had brought him to power and, as he well knew, victory on the

it often adopts courses of action ill-suited to prevailing political circumstances; indeed, the use of war by policy may be a wholly ineffective course of action. Policy does not necessarily read political situations correctly, but nevertheless, it is an inextricable part of the wider political process and in implementation it creates new political realities, which it and others responds to in turn.

Whilst policy is unilateral we must be mindful not to view it simply as a rigid 'given', a static statement of intention, or an immovable reality such as a written manifesto. Behind the concept of policy are real people, reacting to events, considering sacrifices made, and risks to be weighed. Importantly, policy implies action: it is the will that sets the group on a particular course, it determines movement along new bearings, and has the potential for adaptability and change. Whilst we may be able to identify a pre-eminent overarching objective, policy itself can be plural – it can be comprised of multiple simultaneous or subsidiary ends or 'interests', some of which may prove incompatible with others; just as individuals can be driven by numerous and competing impulses and motives. So, policy relates to the ends of a community but, it must also be seen as a more dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon, actively shaping parameters of action, determining resources to be employed, and generally acting as a conscious force which orients and drives political collectivities in various directions.

Problems with policy in Clausewitz's work

In the light of this brief discussion, some immediate problems in relation to Clausewitz's ideas arise. Three issues in particular require consideration: policy is presented as an unitary and unproblematic thing itself; the term policy has a strong association with the state which potentially limits its wider meaning; and there is an underlying assumption of policy rationality and reasonableness. We will examine each in turn.

battlefield was in the end what would keep him there.' Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars*, pp. 74-75. Such wars might appear to be a form of war for war's sake, but in fact the end is as much a political purpose as any other. It does not matter if the ultimate end relates to an internal matter but, of course, in making war with other states, whatever the original motivation, an external political situation is thereby created.

⁸⁶ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 85.

First, it is true that in *On War* Clausewitz treats policy in a distinctly unitary fashion, largely skating over the fact of the political processes internal to its formulation. He states that it is the ‘aim of policy is to unify and reconcile all aspects of internal administration as well as of spiritual values...it is simply the trustee for all these interests against other states.’⁸⁷ This reflects Clausewitz’s paternalistic view of politics, common at the time,⁸⁸ which saw the state leadership as the natural repository for political decision in the interests of the nation,⁸⁹ the ‘corporate soul’.⁹⁰ Clausewitz even describes policy as ‘the intelligence of the personified State.’⁹¹ Policy was something determined and shaped by the state leadership, and which – following, in broad respects, the Hegelian ideal of the political ‘unity, disinterest and supreme expression of society as a whole’⁹² – helps account for Clausewitz’s unitary conception of policy.⁹³ Policy reflected an organic harmony of interest, and its purpose was not to reconcile contending political interests.⁹⁴ Clausewitz thus somewhat downplays the hard-fought political battles that exist at all stages of policy formulation – prior to and during the course of war – and between various groups or bodies in society (not least between the military and civilian institutions).⁹⁵

Yet, as Paret explains, Clausewitz did not subscribe to the extremes of the idealists, and did not ‘consider the state as an agent in the service of an ultimate purposeful scheme for humanity, dominated by universal historical and ethical principles.’⁹⁶ During his career Clausewitz himself ‘bitterly opposed the political

⁸⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 733.

⁸⁸ This is linked to the idea of the eighteenth century idea of the absolutist state as a ‘living whole, a sovereign actor with clear aims equipped with a ‘personified intelligence.’” Herberg-Rothe, *Puzzle*, p. 142.

⁸⁹ Gat notes that, ‘The ideal that guided Clausewitz throughout his life – the vitality, stability, and power of the community in its political framework – was a characteristic product, historically and ideologically of the continuous rise of the centralised state throughout the early modern period and its triumph over all other social focuses of power.’ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 247.

⁹⁰ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 617.

⁹¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham and ed. F. N. Maude (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 120. In the Howard translation it has it as: ‘If the state is thought of as a person, and the policy as the product of its brain...’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 100.

⁹² See Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 243.

⁹³ Fichte had also expressed such views in his ‘appreciation of the state’s role in uniting individuals into an organic whole.’ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 178.

⁹⁴ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 250.

⁹⁵ See Echevarria on this point, *Clausewitz*, p. 93. This view may also reflect the example of Napoleon and Frederick on Clausewitz’s thought – leaders who combined political and military leadership and allowed little debate over policy direction.

⁹⁶ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, pp. 178-79.

aims and even the declared policy of the king’⁹⁷ and, given these personal experiences, must have been aware that political contention over state policy meant decisions were by no means predetermined by any organic process.⁹⁸ In reality there is no certainty that the various institutions, key constituencies, or factional interests within a political entity will naturally subscribe to the designs of the political leadership – a fact that can greatly impinge on the course and conduct of war. Indeed, in 1812 Clausewitz left the service of the Prussian military precisely because he vehemently disagreed with the policy of the king. Clausewitz was well aware of these problems, yet perhaps chose to bypass them in the interest of analytical simplicity.

The dynamics of policy formulation may be crucial to understanding war as they can powerfully shape the ends, choices, and behaviour of belligerents. The history of the last two centuries has displayed countless incidents of internal strife between civil and military institutions and members of coalitions, mutinies, revolutions, and military coups.⁹⁹ Whether alliance, state, tribe, or insurgent group, we can usually observe complex internal political processes taking place in relation to the formulation of objectives.¹⁰⁰ Potentially, the outcomes of such internal power struggles can completely alter the complexion of a war (a good example being the Bolshevik take-over in Russia in 1917 and its impact on the course of the First World War). The fact of internal politics occupying the concerns of policymakers can also often lead to operations conducted for reasons

⁹⁷ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 250.

⁹⁸ Indeed, in his essay on ‘The Germans and the French’ written in 1807, Clausewitz specifically comments on the difficulty of achieving national consensus on political issues in Germany. He states that, ‘Thanks to this spirit, which pervades everything and subjects even the most perfect political achievement to penetrating criticism, transforming the whole population into a standing army of nay-sayers, it is certain that in Germany, more than anywhere else, even the most outstanding accomplishment will find its detractors; that there are no circumstances under which the nation will willingly unite.’ Clausewitz, ‘The Germans and the French’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 258.

⁹⁹ Such cases are certainly not confined to unstable Third World countries. During the second half of the twentieth century concerns about military interventions in domestic politics was exacerbated by the existence of powerful militaries in peacetime demanded by the Cold War and events such as the anti-Gaullist coup plotted in France in the early 1960s provoked by the withdrawal from Algeria and the seizure of power by the army in Greece (1967) and Portugal (1974). This helps account for the popularity of Clausewitz’s political theory which emphasised the subordination of the military to their civilian masters. See Hew Strachan, ‘the military in politics’, in Richard Holmes (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 728.

¹⁰⁰ Or, of course, the leader may be so powerful so that his word is final on matters of policy. This again reflects an internal political situation – just one of dictatorial control. Hitler’s complete authority in Nazi Germany is a good example.

almost entirely dissociated from the military situation – indeed, this can be a major motive for war in the first instance.

Wars can of course display a complex interaction between various armed groups simultaneously.¹⁰¹ This fact does not undermine the integrity of the distinctions between internal politics, policy, and external politics. The precise locus of decision-making in relation to the use of force can be extremely blurred, overlapping, or confused, yet basic theoretical distinctions help us recognise what we might call ‘the realm of war’: political battles certainly takes place within groups, but war is conducted between at least partially unified entities whose policy involves the threat or use of force directed at others. In this sense, Clausewitz’s assumptions about *a single dominant policy* may not be as misleading as some have held; we must just be aware that it shrouds underlying conflicts of interest that continually shape resultant policy directions. In many cases, internal divisions develop into outright conflict, which greatly alter the complexion of the war as a whole.¹⁰²

The second and potentially more damaging criticism to consider relates to the very use of the term policy itself. The term has strong associations with the modern state. Yet, policy need not be understood in a strictly Eurocentric or historically confined sense of the political decisions of the modern nation-state.¹⁰³ Some commentators adopt parochial conceptions of policy as solely the preserve of states, and so by extension attribute to Clausewitz the mistaken conclusion that his dictum ‘means nothing more or less than that [war] represents an instrument in the hands of the state.’¹⁰⁴ Yet, as Paret notes, ‘It goes without saying that political energy is created not only by the state, and military power is

¹⁰¹ Groups may be subsumed into others or divide into new entities that have the capacity to wage war as an independent collectivity: the *condottieri* of the Renaissance period were hired by rulers as the instruments of their military policy, but also many established themselves as ‘independent princes with whom any contract was virtually a treaty between sovereign powers.’ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 26.

¹⁰² Of course, the policy of divide and rule of the British Empire actively sought to exacerbate such internal tensions. Such stratagems might approximate to Clausewitz’s definition of actions that have ‘direct political repercussions.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 105.

¹⁰³ Creveld’s whole critique of Clausewitz rests on the assumption that Clausewitz’s concept of policy is restricted to the modern state and thus, political behaviour by groups other than the state do not fall within his theoretical framework. He cannot explain events before the emergence of the Westphalian era or what he claims is an emerging post-Westphalian state. See Creveld, *Transformation*.

¹⁰⁴ Creveld, *Transformation*, p. 125.

often associated with other political interests or factions.’¹⁰⁵ Of course, Clausewitz had the modern state at the forefront of his mind (its actions and wars were the focus of his personal experiences and historical studies), yet he was well aware that other war-making peoples have existed – from empire to roving horde¹⁰⁶ – that possessed nothing like the level of institutional sophistication of modern states, yet that nevertheless identified objectives and interests and conducted war in pursuit of them.

Collectivities that possess the means of force can take the form of highly hierarchically structured, territorially bound entities such as modern states. They can be expansive entities based on armed might, such as the Mongol Empire, or on religious faith, such as the Holy Roman Empire. They can be unstructured, fragmented, territorially disparate ‘agglomerations of loosely associated forces’¹⁰⁷ – as Clausewitz put it – such as was often the case in Europe during the Middle Ages, or as might pertain to a modern global terrorist group such as al-Qaeda. The potential forms are endless, yet we do assume some measure of agency on behalf of the group possessed of the means of organised political and military power.

Even if we conclude that Clausewitz was too attached to the state, we should, as Bassford claims, be concerned with what is useful, not what is ‘true’ in Clausewitz’s ideas, in order to improve our understanding of war. The terminology is arguably restrictive in this case, although any synonym runs the risk of generality. ‘Purpose’, for instance, is vague and can encompass many things that are not related to issues of power or politics. Phrases such as ‘political purpose’ or ‘political objective’ are acceptable, but policy is a useful shorthand for the political objectives of any organised social group, whether modern state or not. Mike Smith cites a useful definition that does not imply any strict association with any particular historical political entity: policy is ‘a

¹⁰⁵ Paret, *Understanding*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁶ This point is made by Echevarria: ‘By the term state we should understand that he meant any politically sovereign body, to include individual Tartar tribes, a definition which would also encompass our contemporary notion of nonstates.’ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 84. Perhaps Echevarria goes too far here. Clausewitz most probably has the modern state in mind when using the term in his works. The point is that Clausewitz was clearly aware of the existence of other forms of politically sovereign groups, and his concepts are flexible enough to allow for this.

¹⁰⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 710.

planned line of conduct in the light of which individual decisions are made and co-ordination achieved.’¹⁰⁸

Third, in the relevant sentence of the trinity, war is said to be subject to reason *because* it is an instrument of policy: the implication being that policy is somehow the natural repository of reason. What is Clausewitz suggesting when he states that war will be subordinate to ‘pure reason’?¹⁰⁹ As Bassford notes, the adjective ‘pure’ need not unduly concern us as it is largely formulaic, reflecting the contemporary philosophical idiom.¹¹⁰ At base, reason relates to the use of the human mind, the intellect, or the ‘cognitive faculty’ as Kant had it.¹¹¹ Reason is a mode of thought that is peculiar to humans due to their ability to speculate and form logical judgements. In practical contexts, reason is associated with rationality; that is, behaviour that seeks to tailor means to ends.¹¹² We therefore generally speak of rationality when humans coherently identify objectives, define aims to achieve, determine methods to follow, and develop criteria to judge achievement of objectives. Importantly, neither eventual success nor the precise nature of the objectives are vital conditions of rationality: rather it is the form of the behaviour, not its outcome or character that defines its rationality.¹¹³ Rationality appeals to a certain independence of mind in determining actions to be undertaken, uninfluenced by factors external to the problem at hand.¹¹⁴ From where the ends derive – whether called into being by reason, emotion, or cultural influences – is largely irrelevant to the notion that once purposes are established, actors seek to fulfil them through employing available means.

So, an essential precondition for rational action is purpose. Indeed, at the heart of this tendency lies Clausewitz’s foundational belief that humans are

¹⁰⁸ Mike Smith, ‘Strategy in an age of ‘low-intensity’ warfare: why Clausewitz is still more relevant than his critics’, in Duyvesteyn and Angstrom, *Rethinking*, p. 35

¹⁰⁹ As Bassford’s more accurate translation has it. Bassford, ‘Primacy of Policy’, p. 77.

¹¹⁰ Most famously enshrined in the title of Kant’s first critique.

¹¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 134.

¹¹² Michael Oakeshott notes the difficulty of applying reason to human *conduct* in his essay on ‘Rational Conduct’, in Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), p. 99.

¹¹³ Michael Oakeshott notes that rationality relates to a ‘manner of behaving and only derivatively to...what it achieves or the success with which it accomplishes what was intended. Thus, to behave ‘rationally’ is to behave ‘intelligently’, and whether such behaviour is pragmatically successful will depend upon circumstances other than its rationality...a lunatic, whose behaviour we recognise as ‘irrational’, is not always unsuccessful in achieving his designs, and...a correct conclusion may be reached in spite of false reasoning.’ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹¹⁴ Such as emotion, religious doctrine, or any other form of outside authority, and so on.

purposeful beings: he refers to hostile *intentions* as ‘the universal element.’¹¹⁵ War will contain an element of reason in so far as it is a social phenomenon resulting from conscious thought and action directed toward some aim. That humans sometimes fail to achieve their ends, either because they were objectively unattainable or because they apply inappropriate means, does not necessarily negate the existence of purpose, reason, or rationality.

We must be mindful not to apply narrow standards of rationality dependent on hindsight, or because we ourselves would not countenance such ends or employ such means in a given situation. Whilst we shudder at Hitler’s terrifying ends and the often gratuitous means he employed – this does not necessarily imply they were wholly irrational. We may claim it was irrational for Hitler to invade Russia in June 1941 or for Japan to attack Pearl Harbour, yet those decisions were geared toward specific ends: establishing *lebensraum* in Eastern Europe or a Japanese ‘Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere’; moreover both had good reason to believe they had the means to achieve those ends.¹¹⁶ Although there may be good reasons to claim that they may have been *objectively* irrational decisions.¹¹⁷ Rationality can only be realistically understood as being strongly subjective and context dependent. Clausewitz’s

¹¹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 84.

¹¹⁶ For instance, in the German case, the dire performance of the Soviet army during the 1939-40 Winter War with Finland, Hitler’s success against France and Britain in May-June 1940, the advantage of surprise by abandoning the Nazi-Soviet pact, and generally, the magnitude and strength of the German armed forces. In Japan’s case, the US was attacked because it stood in the way of further expansion into South Asia, primarily given its presence in the Philippines. In late 1941, the colonial powers were weakened and preoccupied with defence of their homeland, the Soviet Union was engaged in a brutal struggle for survival, and America was judged by Japan to be coercible through a dramatic show of strength. Even though Japanese leaders understood the danger of an attritional war with America, it judged that this was an acceptable risk given its overall objectives. That this objectively revealed the flawed assumptions (particularly with regard to how the US public would react and its commitment to Chinese sovereignty) and the detrimental influence of an expansionist ideology is not to argue decisions were taken without a rational weighing up of means against ends. If it wished to pursue its imperial object, December 1941 was probably not an unreasonable time to act. We are not arguing that all of Japan’s decisions were correct, but that a reasoned dialogue between ends and means is definitely apparent in their behaviour, however futile and foolish they may appear to outsiders and in hindsight.

¹¹⁷ Yet, simply because there may have been alternatives is not an argument against rationality. For instance, in the case of Hitler, the precedent of 1812; his ignoring of professional military advice warning against the invasion; the immense size of the Russian theatre; and so on, suggest irrationality. But, in practical rationality, there are always costs and benefits to weigh in the dialogue between ends and means, and decisions have to factor in the value one places on the end to be achieved. Of course, there is a limit – where the means are clearly absent for a given end, continued action in pursuit of it must be deemed irrational. Practical rationality is inextricably bound up with the judgement of probabilities from an actors point of view – there is no perfect, objective standard which can be implied in the individual case, even with hindsight.

aim was not to measure behaviour in war against some perfect standard of reason. His association of reason with policy derives from the fact that it is ultimately policy – ‘the original motive for the war’¹¹⁸ – which establishes the ends of the group, and importantly, whether to employ force to achieve those ends. Where a conscious policy exists a necessary corollary is action in pursuit of that policy, which will be rational to the extent that it is intended to attain that purpose. Clausewitz is certainly not suggesting that all groups always behave or act perfectly rationally: he was well aware of the frequently devastating follies which leaders commit, which are often, as Howard argues, due to a ‘superabundance of analytical rationality.’¹¹⁹ In accepting an association of reason with policy Clausewitz is not claiming that all policy is necessarily correct, sensible, or reasonable: we must be careful not to confuse rationality with wisdom in policy.¹²⁰ As Clausewitz knew well, policy ‘can err, subserve the ambitions, private interests, and vanity of those in power.’¹²¹

Creveld describes the idea that war must always be for some purpose as the ‘original sin’ of modern strategic thinking, due primarily to the influence of Clausewitz: ‘namely the idea that war consists of the members of one group killing those of another ‘in order to’ achieve this objective or that.’¹²² War for Creveld cannot be rational because ‘it is absurd for a person to die for somebody or something else’ and ‘to die for one’s own interest is almost equally absurd.’¹²³ He concludes that people must fight ‘only to the extent that they experience war itself and everything pertaining to it as an end.’¹²⁴ Although Creveld’s depiction of Clausewitz probably derived from the ‘liberal reduction of Clausewitzian theory to rationality’¹²⁵ which principally occurred with the publication of

¹¹⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 90.

¹¹⁹ Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 14. Clausewitz similarly warned about such rationalistic approaches to problems in war. Intuitive judgement was more reliable given the uncertainties and intangibles associated with action in war.

¹²⁰ Bassford, ‘Primacy of Policy’ p. 85.

¹²¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 733.

¹²² Creveld, *Transformation*, p. 190.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹²⁵ Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, ‘Introduction’, p. 11. They have in mind here Paret’s *Clausewitz and the State* and Raymond Aron’s *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War* Clausewitz: *Philosopher of War*, trans. C. Booker and N. Stone (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985), which both ‘stressed the rationality of Clausewitz’s approach.’

important studies in the 1970s, this analysis is misleading in a number of respects.

First, Creveld's conclusion rests upon the contention that individuals entering upon war expect that they will die. If this is not necessarily the case – reflected in the 'it won't be me mentality'¹²⁶ – then it surely can be rational to risk death for certain objectives; that risk may be judged acceptable given the potential consequences of inaction. Whatever motives are found to be behind the minds of individuals entering into war, far from constituting things to die for,¹²⁷ they can equally be, and often are, things to live for: there is not necessarily an assumption of imminent death, even if this may preoccupy the minds of many. Second, Creveld underestimates individuals' conception of themselves as part of a wider group: that humans will fight to defend their primary kin-group because they are subliminally aware of their own weakness without its protection. This has deep evolutionary origins and helps explain why the survival of the gene, or perhaps 'meme',¹²⁸ pool as embodied in the tribe, nation, and so forth, can become synonymous with individual 'interest' or survival: this may involve risking death or even sacrificing oneself for the good of the community.¹²⁹ The concept of survival is not necessarily purely individualistic. As Aristotle held, the individual is crucially dependent on the community: 'man is by nature a political animal' – he has a natural impulse toward association – and therefore the 'state is prior to the individual.'¹³⁰

A third linked point is that Creveld's is a predominantly individualistic argument for an activity that is collective by definition. The reasons why any individual decides to fight¹³¹ are likely to differ from those of the social group (although they certainly may approximate). That the purpose of a war does not make sense to the individual, does not entail that the war is not being fought for some real interest of the group. That war becomes an end in itself for some of

¹²⁶ John Keegan, *War and Our World: The Reith Lectures 1998* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), p. 56.

¹²⁷ Which, in fact, they may often be; honour for instance.

¹²⁸ A term first used by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* and which broadly relates to an extension of evolutionary logic to cultural imitation and replication.

¹²⁹ The deep roots of sacrifice in relation to war is explored in Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites*.

¹³⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 59-61. To be completely independent of society is to be either subhuman or superhuman, a dumb animal, or God.

¹³¹ Of course, 'decide' may be a wholly inappropriate term where soldiers are conscripted, coerced, or press-ganged into fighting, as was common practice in the British Navy during the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

the individuals caught up in it, even the leadership, does not imply that war as a collective phenomenon is best conceived of as an end itself.¹³² The individualistic perspective certainly raises important psychological and cultural questions, but does not seriously jeopardise Clausewitz's conception of war as collective purposeful behaviour.¹³³ We must now consider this latter important point, as formulated by Clausewitz, in greater detail.

War's subordination as an instrument of policy

That war is an instrument of policy has become something of a truism, almost to the point of cliché, in Western strategic literature, regardless of how well the implications and complexities of the idea are actually understood. The ubiquity and prevalence of the idea can in large part be attributed to Clausewitz: often direct reference is made to *On War* whenever this principle is outlined, whether in historical, strategic, or International Relations literature.¹³⁴ The idea is commonly used out of the context which Clausewitz intended, thus draining it of much of its meaning.¹³⁵ Also, the idea is often mistakenly presented as representing the totality of his theorising on war.¹³⁶ Its most common modern usage is as a prescriptive device; one especially suited to liberal democracies where the subordination of the military to civilian control is deemed a vital component of a properly constituted modern state, particularly in the nuclear age. The complexities of the concept are often diluted in the interest of doctrinal precision and pedagogical clarity: we are expected to unquestioningly accept the

¹³² Of course Creveld is right to claim that the interests and objectives of the individuals that make up an armed force will often vary (sometimes significantly) from the proclaimed goals of the group as a whole.

¹³³ As Clausewitz states: 'when whole communities go to war – whole peoples, and especially civilised peoples – the reason always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 98.

¹³⁴ Howard notes that the 'popular view which links his name with the phrase is not at fault. This was no casual *obiter dictum*, but the essence of his thought.' Howard, 'War as an instrument of policy', in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 193.

¹³⁵ Recent years have seen a proliferation of crude renderings of Clausewitz's much misunderstood phrase. For instance, see M. J. Williams, 'The Coming Revolution in foreign affairs: rethinking American national security', *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 6, November 2008, p. 1111. He makes the point, derived from John Keegan's distorted conclusions, that Clausewitz 'privileged the regiment and state above all other factors.' It is unclear what this cheap shot at Clausewitz actually achieves in the articulation of his argument (which itself is convincing), whilst it serves to perpetuate mistaken representations which bracket Clausewitz within a narrow 'Napoleonic structure of war', p. 1109.

¹³⁶ Herberg-Rothe, *Puzzle*, p. 139.

idea as fact with little deeper justification. Creveld is correct that, ‘if only because its very ubiquity tends to conceal its meaning, it deserves serious analysis.’¹³⁷ Given the profusion of critiques in relation to this aspect of Clausewitz’s thought, this situation will not suffice. Strachan and Herberg-Rothe state the problem directly:

[if] we believe that war is always waged to fulfil political objectives, is it any more than a truism to say so? And does it make the truism any more true if we put Clausewitz’s name alongside it?...[It] does not become either more or less true because of what Clausewitz believed about the relationship between the two.¹³⁸

The point is that it is not sufficient to defend this aspect of Clausewitz’s thought through insistence: by *simply repeating it* in the face of counterarguments.¹³⁹ If anything, such insistence casts greater doubt on its veracity.¹⁴⁰ We must seek to reveal why it is mistaken to assume that this conception was simply ‘invented’, but is indeed a universal element of war.¹⁴¹ A more robust explanation is required; what is actually meant by the notion that war is an instrument of policy?

At a basic level, Clausewitz is making the point that the use of military force is a means to a higher end, and the end in question is the political object: war is a tool which policy utilises to achieve its objectives, and as such has a measure of rational utility. To make this claim may appear ‘ruthless, cold-blooded, militaristic and abhorrent’.¹⁴² Yet, from the outset we should be clear that, as Howard and others have demonstrated, Clausewitz is describing an evidential fact about the world: his assertion that war is an instrument is descriptive, not prescriptive.¹⁴³ This is confused by the fact that Clausewitz often draws prescriptive conclusions on the basis of this observation, and the two

¹³⁷ Creveld, *Transformation*, p. 124.

¹³⁸ Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, ‘Introduction’, p. 10.

¹³⁹ Although as Herbert Spencer said, ‘By iteration only can alien conceptions be forced upon reluctant minds.’ Quoted in J. F. C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War*. Available online at: <<http://cgsc.leavenworth.army.mil/carl/resources/csi/fuller2/fuller2.asp>>, retrieved 10 November 2008.

¹⁴⁰ In the sense that the repetition actually undermines its truth, like someone who knows they have lost an argument but tries to salvage his pride by clinging to his point of view and hopes it will be accepted by relentlessly repeating it.

¹⁴¹ Creveld, *Transformation*, p. 126.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁴³ Howard, ‘War as an Instrument of Policy’, p. 193.

perspectives are often presented close together in the text. It is indeed somewhat ironic that, what can at first sight appear to be a morally repugnant statement – because it seems to suggest Clausewitz viewed the resort to force as an ‘entirely routine extension of unilateral state policy’ as if the ‘policy of a state is incomplete unless war is one of its instruments’,¹⁴⁴ – actually leads Clausewitz to conclude that war *ought*, in a practical and moral sense, to be subject to policy otherwise it becomes ‘something pointless and devoid of sense.’¹⁴⁵

So, what are the implications of insisting that war is subordinate to policy as an instrument? It is useful to explore the extreme boundaries of what this conception, taken alone, entails. In this light, just as the form of any instrument will be determined by the purpose for which it exists, so too will war be shaped by its overriding purpose: as Clausewitz explains, war ‘is controlled by its political object’,¹⁴⁶ which ‘will set its course, prescribe the scale of means and effort which is required, and makes its influence felt throughout down to the smallest operational detail.’¹⁴⁷ So, the purpose for which the use of force is intended will be the major determinant of the course and character of the war. This idea is clearly reflected in Clausewitz’s work where he discusses the relationship between purpose, aim, and means. These discussions set up distinctly rational chains of action and feedback which establish a purpose to be achieved, a military aim that will best serve the purpose, and finally the selection of means most appropriate to attainment of the military aim.

Through this hierarchically structured logic, we can expect the means used in war to remain firmly under the control of policy. We should essentially be able to explain, in broad terms, the actions of the individual soldier – where he is, what he is attempting to achieve, and why – by the overarching demands of policy, because all parts will stand in logical relation to it. The control of policy might manifest itself in, for instance, setting geographical limits to an army’s movements, determining appropriate targets, or establishing the appropriate moment to seek a negotiated settlement. This perspective does not necessarily downplay the importance of military considerations; war ‘is entitled to require

¹⁴⁴ Howard, ‘War as an Instrument of Policy’, p. 194.

¹⁴⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 732. This viewpoint also explains why no military force can be self-justified. Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 30.

¹⁴⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 104.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 700.

that the trend and designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means.’¹⁴⁸ Policy must understand the capabilities, limits, strengths, and weaknesses of the instrument it employs (as is the case for any rational behaviour), yet the crucial point is that all military action is ultimately geared towards political objectives: military concerns ‘will never do more than modify them.’¹⁴⁹ One might use the analogy of cogs in a machine: the movement of even the smallest cogs is determined by the master cog of policy; when it turns all others turn in relation to it.¹⁵⁰

In this pure conception, all action in war perfectly and rationally relates to the given purpose. When, for instance, the stated object is achieved one would logically terminate the war, or where the sacrifices become too great in relation to the purpose, when policy is clearly no longer being served, one would seek a settlement or capitulate: the value attached to the political object rules, not military success.¹⁵¹ As Clausewitz notes, because ‘it is policy that has created war’ it is only natural that it remains subordinate to the ‘guiding intelligence that brought it into existence.’¹⁵² In one of his most rationalistic passages, Clausewitz notes that ‘the value of the object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.’¹⁵³ So, the use of force is in a constant hierarchical relationship with policy: the latter setting the terms and conditions for the former. The assumption is that those leading the war have chosen what they believe to be the most appropriate means to attain the desired end, and the latter will remain the principal criterion of the efforts to be made and resources employed. The particular military solution will depend on circumstances and the object in

¹⁴⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 99.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

¹⁵⁰ Creveld employs an alternative analogy: ‘Just as the thousands of components that go into, say, an urban transportation network will not in the absence of a directing hand combine into a purposeful system but rather collapse into a formless jumble, so the various elements that war comprises can make sense solely in terms of the purpose at hand.’ Martin van Creveld, ‘The Eternal Clausewitz’, in Michael I. Handel (ed.), *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 42.

¹⁵¹ Brodie notes that this ‘attitude includes necessarily a readiness to re-examine whether under the circumstances existing it is right to continue it [the war] or whether it is better to seek some solution or termination other than victory, even if victory in the strictly military sense is judged attainable.’ Brodie, *War and Politics*, p. 439.

¹⁵² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 733.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

question: as Clausewitz notes, there are many potential roads to victory to choose from and a 'prince or general can best demonstrate his genius by managing a campaign exactly to suit his objectives and his resources, doing neither too much or too little.'¹⁵⁴

The description above, whilst capturing the essence of the issue, by no means represents the extent of Clausewitz's ideas. If it did, no doubt accusations of pure rationalism would be justified. The idea of a rational process does feed into the concept of war as subordinate to policy, *but only to an extent*. Where Clausewitz discusses purpose and means, or war plans, his intention is clearly more prescriptive and represents an ideal strategic construct whereby all parts would gel seamlessly into a rationally directed whole, in which practitioners would always be asking, as Brodie notes, 'what any war existing or impending is really about and what it is attempting to accomplish.'¹⁵⁵ This perspective is most clear in Book 8 where Clausewitz states that: 'War plans cover every aspect of war, and weave them all into a single operation that must have a single, ultimate objective in which all particular aims are reconciled.'¹⁵⁶

Undoubtedly, this idea is practically seductive and perhaps reflected the diligent state servant in Clausewitz, motivated by a desire to solve the strategic problems faced by Prussia. Clausewitz's intention in the trinity was to describe the nature of war as it manifested itself in all its rich variety in reality, yet this did not prevent him from, elsewhere, passionately promoting his ideas on how war *should* be fought. These perspectives sit together uneasily in his work and we must be careful to distinguish between the two, whilst also accepting their interaction (much of what Clausewitz believed *ought* to be done, stemmed from his recognition of what war *is*). Yet Clausewitz stressed the great difficulties that he knew, in reality, intervened in such theoretically neat, logical relationships. He could not be more clear on this point:

The degree of force that must be used against the enemy depends on the scale of political demands on either side. These demands, so far as they are known, would show what efforts each must make; *but they seldom are fully known*... Nor are the situation and conditions of the belligerents

¹⁵⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 208. The example of Frederick the Great was probably in his mind whilst drafting this sentence.

¹⁵⁵ Brodie, *War and Politics*, p. 439.

¹⁵⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 700.

alike. This can be a second factor...Just as disparate are the governments' strength of will, their character and abilities...These three considerations introduce uncertainties that make it difficult to gauge the amount of resistance to be faced and, in consequence, the means required and the objectives to be set.¹⁵⁷

This reality, Clausewitz persists, means that any strictly logical answer to the problem is out of question; indeed such reasoning may prove to be 'a most unsuitable and awkward intellectual tool.'¹⁵⁸ Rather, what is required is intuitive *judgement* 'to detect the most important and decisive elements in the vast array of facts and situations':¹⁵⁹ which requires decisions and behaviour not strictly derived from rational processes or abstract principles. Clausewitz certainly did not hold that any superlative standard of rational behaviour, which would always maximise the interests of policymakers through the use of force, was humanly achievable.

The form of instrumental logic described above will, Clausewitz held, be apparent in any war, but the extent of its control will be extenuated by many factors, some associated with the nature of instrumentality itself. Instruments, of course, can be used for purposes other than those that they were originally or ostensibly designed for, they may be ill-suited to the tasks asked of them, or be employed by the user ineffectively. Stating that war is an instrument does not necessarily entail it will always have utility in relation to all political objects or that it will be used efficiently and effectively. Clausewitz knew this to be the case, as he had seen how ineffective the Prussian instrument of war was when it faced Napoleon's *Grand Armée* on the battlefields of Jena-Auerstedt in 1806 – yet it was employed by the state as an instrument nevertheless. Instrumentality is more complex than may be assumed.

Also, as Clausewitz emphasises, the subordination of war to policy in his conception by no means entails complete control. This point is made in section 23 of Book 1, Chapter 1. Subordination, he explains, 'does not imply that the political aim is a tyrant.'¹⁶⁰ Just as a subordinate commander can disobey orders and follow their own inclinations, so too can war in relation to policy. Policy, he

¹⁵⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 707. Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 702.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 707.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

states, ‘will permeate all military operations, and, *in so far as their violent nature will admit*, it will have a continuous influence on them.’¹⁶¹ As Echevarria states, ‘contrary to what many scholars have maintained, Clausewitz placed some significant limits on policy’s control over military operations.’¹⁶² Clausewitz could not be clearer in his assertion that, even though the political aim will remain the ‘first consideration’ because the ‘prime cause of its existence will remain the supreme consideration in conducting it’, war – more than any other instrument – can often escape the control of its user. However, he argues, war usually lasts long enough for policy to maintain some control over its instrument; for it to ‘remain subject to the action of a superior intelligence.’¹⁶³

The concept of war’s subordination to policy causes us to focus on an important and integral aspect of war. This relates to the extent to which in war, from the perspective of the groups involved, there is a constant interaction between ends and means, purpose and instrument, at all levels, and which ultimately relate back to the highest end; to policy. This provides a unity to all action in war and weaves a thread of reason through the whole, however much this may appear to be absent in some wars.¹⁶⁴ This conception does not of course preclude multiple distinct actors all operating according to their own purposes: this often has the effect of making the whole look more complex and chaotic, but war’s rational element relates to the purposes and designs of the individual entities involved.

Recent critiques, such as outlined by Creveld,¹⁶⁵ that have denied war’s instrumental nature and rationality point to the cultural determinants of action that seem to discredit it. Such studies are misleading in two principal respects: first, although the basic argument is often not wholly flawed itself, they are mistaken in their reading of Clausewitz. Second, they appear to state their case too strongly. No doubt, for instance, Creveld is right to reveal the diverse ways in which war develops its own peculiar culture and how this culture can be antithetical with respect to achieving stated ends, but overemphasis of this point can distract us from essentials. All rational behaviour naturally takes place in

¹⁶¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 99. Emphasis added.

¹⁶² Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 88.

¹⁶³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 98.

¹⁶⁴ For instance, it appears Japan and Germany abandoned almost all semblance of rationality in their decision to continue fighting in the closing stages of World War II.

¹⁶⁵ Martin van Creveld, *The Culture of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008).

culturally conditioned environments, for no actor operates outside of culture. To posit that rational action must be action unaffected by culture is to deny the potential for rational human action in any circumstances.

Moreover, many cultural forms, supposedly indicative of irrationality, can be explained in instrumental terms, even if this is not to deny that cultural practices can sometimes lead to deleterious practices. Indeed, taking the longer view, specific strategic and military cultures are largely reflections of a community's success in war, the consequence of adaptation to challenges.¹⁶⁶ But the critiques are mistaken at a more basic level in their depiction of Clausewitz. He certainly wanted to reveal the element of reason in war, but, he also explicitly and forcefully exposes its limits, given the eternal play of chance, emotion, and irrationality. He also had a strong feel for the way the unique character of different societies (that Clausewitz often subsumes under the term 'politics', but which we would best understand as culture) affects decisions and action in war. In drawing attention to war's instrumentality, he was not suggesting that all activity in war is rational, perfectly geared towards objectives, or even that policy was right to employ force in the first place.¹⁶⁷

The clear lesson of such interpretations of Clausewitz is that we must be careful not to confuse appearances with substance. In describing war as a 'mere instrument' he *appears* to treat war in purely rational terms, when in fact, upon close analysis, the *substance* of the concept incorporates complexity, contradiction, and nuance: as soon as one breaks the surface of the dictum, a more qualified and realistic meaning is revealed. Prescription is confused with objective reality, pure instrumentality with the limits to practical rationality, and subordination with complete control.

Bringing 'the other' back in – the unity of policy and politics

Our analysis of war's relationship to politics has so far concentrated on its element of subordination to policy – defined as the unilateral objectives of the individual political entity – and has thus brought us to a critical juncture in

¹⁶⁶ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, pp. 146–47.

¹⁶⁷ Crevelde would have been best advised to direct his accusations at true rationalists such as Bülow, modern day 'system's analysts', or rational actor model theorists, and could perhaps even have utilised Clausewitz to lend support to his own ideas.

relation to Clausewitz's thought. Ceasing the analysis here would ignore a crucial idea which he wanted to convey: indeed, mistaken interpretations often stem from a failure to explore beyond policy into the more complex realm of politics. As Clausewitz stressed, war is a multilateral phenomenon, so how can it be simply described as the instrument of one (or both) actor(s)? This introduces a problem in relation to the trinity: at first glance, this tendency does appear to rely on a purely unilateral perspective. To answer this we must return to the text and reveal the way in which policy must always be understood as part of a multilateral whole. (The following analysis is premised on the belief that use of the terms 'policy' or 'politics' in translation of the German *politik* is broadly correct in the Howard/Paret edition of *On War*).

At the beginning of Book 8, Chapter 6B, Clausewitz provides one of his clearest expressions of the relationship between war and politics. Over the first five paragraphs the context of his discussion is clearly about the total political situation, as distinct from unilateral policy. He explains how war is a 'branch of political activity', that the 'source of war is politics – the intercourse of governments and peoples', that it is a 'continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means, that 'war itself does not suspend political intercourse', that war 'cannot be divorced from political life', and that all the salient factors that make up war are political, or 'so closely connected with political activity that it is impossible to separate the two.'¹⁶⁸ The final sentence of the fifth paragraph has it that war, 'cannot follow its own laws, but has to be treated as some other whole; the name of which is policy.'¹⁶⁹ This reversion to the term 'policy' appears to represent a change in Clausewitz's argument, which is borne out by the following paragraph which is more obviously concerned with the perspective of the individual actor and the way in which policy *makes use of* war.¹⁷⁰ The rest of the chapter is more explicitly concerned with the unilateral perspective; which is natural given that Clausewitz is dealing with war plans,

¹⁶⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 731-32.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 732.

¹⁷⁰ Politics as a multilateral phenomenon does not and cannot, of course, 'make use' of anything. This choice of terms in the translation appears correct, because midway through the fifth paragraph Clausewitz appears to subtly shift emphasis towards policy and the way in which it, rather than the political situation itself, prevents the relentless advance of war 'toward the absolute.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 732.

which can only be sensibly considered from a subjective perspective.¹⁷¹ Clausewitz variously refers to policy, ‘political decisions’, and ‘political objectives.’ The discussion also morphs into more prescriptive statements regarding civil-military relations, although there are some references to the importance of political conditions.¹⁷²

So, Clausewitz is certainly keen to draw attention to the importance of the political situation out of which war arises. The idea of instrumentality emerges so seamlessly out of the idea of interactive politics that the transition from one to the other is almost missed. As natural as that may have seemed to Clausewitz, it has caused a great many problems for students of his ideas. The seamlessness of the transition, however, is an initial clue as to his belief in the indissoluble connection between the two perspectives; that the one is naturally implicated in the other. This idea is clarified by turning to Clausewitz’s discussion in Book 1. Here policy and politics are even more intertwined: they are everywhere treated together. Crucially, in section 23, Chapter 1, Clausewitz states that, ‘When whole communities go to war...the reason always lies in some political situation, and the occasion is always due to some political object. War, *therefore*, is an act of policy.’¹⁷³ Here, policy is presented as an intrinsic element of the political situation. The discussion then continues largely from the perspective of policy. The instrumental nature of war is reaffirmed in section 24, but here the connection with politics is stressed: ‘We see therefore that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means.’¹⁷⁴

Where does this analysis leave us in relation to the trinity? In the trinity we are presented with the unilateral policy perspective alone. Yet, policy in Clausewitz’s work is almost nowhere presented as independent from the wider

¹⁷¹ This also clearly reflects the title of the Chapter: ‘War Is an Instrument of Policy.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 731.

¹⁷² A point which Clausewitz had raised in Chapter 3 of the same Book. *Ibid.*, pp. 733 and 736-37.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 98. Emphasis added.

¹⁷⁴ Here the title of the section is ‘War is Merely the Continuation of Policy by Other Means’ which is slightly misleading, as in Book 8 the idea of continuation applies principally to war as a continuation of the total political situation. For this reason, perhaps politics should replace policy as the preferred term in the title to preserve some measure of consistency. It seems prudent to preserve the distinction, as ‘continuation’ best describes the interactive phenomenon of politics, whereas ‘subordination’ is more appropriate to a unilateral relationship, whatever the extent of their mutual dependence. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

political situation: war as a continuation of political intercourse. Indeed, the interactive perspective nearly always precedes discussion of war as viewed from the policy perspective. From an objective viewpoint, as a whole, war emerges from a political situation between belligerents and does not suspend that intercourse but carries it on with different means. To switch abruptly to the policy perspective is natural because the political situation is essentially comprised of the interaction of the individual policies of the belligerents. War is at one and the same time a *continuation* of the political situation and the *instrument* employed by the groups that comprise that situation.

So, in the trinity, whilst we are primarily observing war from the unilateral perspective, the idea of war as a continuation of political intercourse, of politics in its multilateral and interactive sense, is integral to the meaning. This idea also makes it clear why the purpose of any war cannot be anything but fundamentally political, because it, by necessity, relates to a situation of contest over relative power with other groups. This perspective allows us to resolve the apparent problem in Clausewitz presentation of the concept in the trinity, but it also raises further implications and enables us to see why the concept (war as an instrument of policy) is more complex than supposed. Once we acknowledge that the idea of 'war as a continuation of *politics*' is inextricably embodied in the concept of subordination, the elements of chance and passion enter more powerfully into the equation and we move further from the ideal of pure reason and controlled instrumentality. Politics as a process is not rational in itself, thus, if war is a continuation of that process, neither is it, as a whole, a rational phenomenon. This reveals the extent to which the tendencies of the trinity cannot be considered in isolation. Although we still hold that belligerents in war can be expected to reason, judge, and act according to their objectives, potential gains, and probable future losses, this occurs in a multilateral, interactive environment pervaded by external uncontrollable political dynamics, chance occurrences, and the inescapable influence of rising passions. War is shaped not purely by the reasoned policies of each actor, but also by the non-linear nature of the political relationships that their interaction produces, which will be inherently unpredictable and non-rational.

War as a continuation of politics – non-autonomy

To state that war is a continuation of politics is to make a point beyond that of war's instrumentality. We need to explore the implications of these ideas further. Continuation powerfully conveys the idea that war is itself *a form of political behaviour*, and thus, even if subjective policy loses control of the instrument, the lines that run through war remain fundamentally political in nature.¹⁷⁵ This idea cannot be overstated and represents one of the crucial ways in which Clausewitz's thought stands out from earlier thinkers. The importance of this perspective, beyond that of its subordination as an instrument, is emphasised by Clausewitz: the latter view alone may encourage the belief that war is something entirely different to politics because,

it is apt to be assumed that war suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own... war in itself does not suspend political intercourse or change it into something entirely different. In essentials that intercourse continues, irrespective of the means it employs. The main lines along which military events progress, and to which they are restricted, are political lines that continue throughout the war into the subsequent peace.¹⁷⁶

To clarify his position Clausewitz provides a powerful metaphor: whilst war might have its own unique grammar, the underlying logic of war is always political.¹⁷⁷ Naturally, all armed groups must decide how best to achieve the defeat of the enemy based on military operational realities, somewhat in isolation from political concerns. War's grammar alone, as Clausewitz conveyed through his absolute concept, tends to gravitate towards the annihilation of the enemy. The idea of subordination does not suggest war is entirely governed by political considerations; commanders must be free to use their professional judgement to determine how best to achieve the military aim demanded by policy.

So, war is a means and it has its own peculiar character – the dynamics of fighting – that distinguishes it from typical political behaviour, but, as the idea of continuation emphasises, at heart war *is* political behaviour. War substitutes the use of force for 'speech or writing' and represents a different expression of the

¹⁷⁵ See Smith, *On Clausewitz*, p. 102.

¹⁷⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 731.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 731.

thoughts of politicians.¹⁷⁸ Just as diplomacy is political behaviour through negotiation, so war is political behaviour through the threat or use of force. The importance of this point is expressed by Bernard Brodie, who states that, 'the usual conception...stops far short of that understanding. It is preoccupied almost exclusively with the winning of wars, as though the latter were conceived to be something comparable to athletic contests – with, to be sure, an added ingredient of seriousness.'¹⁷⁹

The concept of continuation serves to underline why war should never be viewed as something autonomous, as representing a unity in and of itself. The idea of subordination enables us to conceive of a strong relationship – that war is not independent because it ultimately derives from a political purpose. Yet, the idea of subordination alone may be misleading as it can imply a complete substitution of political behaviour by military force.¹⁸⁰ The idea of continuation goes further, emphasising that war's complete autonomy is impossible because war itself is a form of political behaviour. Subordination encourages the conception that where politics ends war begins, as something simply employed by policy, whilst continuation implies, as Clausewitz puts it, their 'indissoluble connection.'¹⁸¹ Politics and war are both social forces which determine the distribution of power amongst groups, even if the peculiar means of war – its grammar – is distinctive and, is possessed of its own peculiar dynamics and principles.¹⁸² The instrument of war may take many forms and serve many different purposes, but its universal essence can be grasped when we understand that policy is inherently embedded in the perpetual realm of the political, within which the use of force is but a continuation of that form of interaction with altered means: it is in this regard that Clausewitz could state that 'all wars are things of the same nature.'¹⁸³

Even if this idea is understood, there is still considerable room for confusion because history reveals countless examples of occasions when this conception has been wholly rejected by both practitioners and theorists alike. In fact, it might be stated that the default position has been one that clings to a clear

¹⁷⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 731.

¹⁷⁹ Brodie, *War and Politics*, p. 438.

¹⁸⁰ See Smith, *On Clausewitz*, p. 101.

¹⁸¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 737.

¹⁸² The so-called 'principles of war'.

¹⁸³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 732.

separation between the two: the belief that once war begins, politics ends and that military matters should be approached autonomously, resolvable by military solutions alone, which generally implies the destruction of the enemy.¹⁸⁴ This conception is mistaken for it confuses a necessary relationship with a mere point of view. As noted, by extolling war and battle, Napoleon was able to secure repeated military victories, whilst simultaneously generating a political situation fundamentally inimical to the survival of his Empire: war will have political consequences however much practitioners may believe or desire otherwise. War may be an instrument, but if it is to prove an effective one it must be deftly handled – often alongside other tools of policy – otherwise politics has a habit of delivering its own verdict on events. War cannot escape political reality.

The clashes between Bismarck and Moltke ‘the Elder’ during the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian Wars sheds light on these issues. Moltke essentially believed that upon war being declared ‘the soldiers were autonomous in their operations against the enemy until they presented the head of government with the victory that would enable him to conclude an advantageous peace.’¹⁸⁵ Thus, against Austria in 1866 Moltke desired a total victory and a punitive peace¹⁸⁶ and toward the end of the Franco-Prussian War he advocated the complete destruction of the French Army regardless of potential political consequences – in 1871 Moltke spoke of a ‘war of extermination’¹⁸⁷ – whereas Bismarck demanded restraint to ensure the political situation following war did not shift unfavourably against Prussia.¹⁸⁸ As Gat notes, it would be wrong to

¹⁸⁴ Which is exactly what Clausewitz states will be the case in the abstract when the military aim is the only consideration.

¹⁸⁵ Paret, *Understanding*, p. 20. Or as Bond puts it: ‘when the guns speak the politician must fall silent until the commander has delivered the victory. Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 75. This is a view shared by Colmar von der Goltz who, in the late nineteenth century, wrote that ‘war serves the ends of politics best by a complete defeat of the enemy.’ Quoted in Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, p. 106. Although as Heuser notes, this does not necessarily entail wiping the enemy out, but putting them in a position where they feel they cannot continue the fight. This was somewhat similar to the point Clausewitz made, but primarily with regard to unlimited wars.

¹⁸⁶ Bismarck believed such a course would have been politically harmful, primarily because of the potential intervention of other powers if Prussia’s gains were too far reaching. Bond quotes Bismarck who wrote his wife saying, ‘If we are not excessive in our demands and do not believe that we have conquered the world, we will attain a peace which is worth our effort...I have the thankless task...of making it clear that we don’t live alone in Europe but with three other Powers who hate and envy us.’ Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 65.

¹⁸⁷ Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, p. 105. There is a link to passion here (discussed in Chapter 6) because, as Bond notes, Moltke’s extreme views were fuelled by a hatred of the enemy. Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 73.

¹⁸⁸ Bismarck’s concerns relate to an old problem in peace-making, where in a balance of power system it is generally unwise to completely destroy another power as that may induce other states

claim that Moltke did not believe there was a connection between war and politics, yet his conception of the nature of war was certainly contrary to the mature views of Clausewitz.¹⁸⁹ Moltke, along with many other commanders, mistakenly believed that there are purely military operational solutions to strategic problems. As Clausewitz importantly noted, ‘War does not contain *in itself* the elements for a complete decision and final settlement.’¹⁹⁰ It was only thanks to Bismarck’s interventions, that Prussia was able to successfully fight two ferocious campaigns ‘but for specific limited political objectives.’¹⁹¹

Any particular commander or leader may fervently subscribe to the notion that military considerations should be approached in their own right – that military victory represents an autonomous standard – and that war should be fought regardless of political imperatives. Indeed, we do not deny that people have thought this way; it is revealed in history and current practice.¹⁹² Yet, this does not alter the fundamental fact that all military activity *is* inherently political, regardless of what any particular actor may believe.¹⁹³ The Moltkean position is perfectly understandable, but essentially irrelevant from an objective perspective, and simply reveals the way in which the instrument – war – can potentially be mishandled due to subjective factors, but the effects – the outcome – of such a mishandling will always ultimately be political (manifested in changed power

to rectify the resultant imbalance. Also, the survival of the enemy state is often necessary as it needs to retain the capacity to implement the peace treaty and may be required for future alliances against other states. Bismarck had already achieved his ultimate aim which was to promote the unification of Germany through a successful foreign war (the Second Reich was proclaimed in January 1871). There was no need, as Moltke believed there was, for the destruction of French forces. Not only might that have brought other powers (such as Russia) into the war in order to balance the growth of Prussian power, but it may also have led to a revisionist France in future years. The most famous negative example is perhaps the peace dictated to Germany following World War I. As inevitable as it may have been, it was a source of great instability in the interwar years and a major contributing factor to the rise of Hitler and World War II.

¹⁸⁹ Gat, *Military Thought*, pp. 337-41.

¹⁹⁰ Clausewitz quoted in Michael I. Handel, *War, Strategy and Intelligence* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 455. Emphasis added.

¹⁹¹ Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 67.

¹⁹² For instance, this was the dominant approach to planning, in France, Britain, Russia, and Germany in the build up to the First World War: ‘military, not political, considerations dominated military planning’ and the annihilation of the enemy reigned supreme regardless of political consequences. Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, p. 107.

¹⁹³ This helps explain the misunderstanding of commentators such as Creveld who are over-impressed by the subjective, at the expense of the objective perspective. History may supply examples of societies for whom the act of war (fighting itself) assumes an almost existential meaning, apparently contradicting Clausewitz and calling his political conception into doubt. Yet one must keep in mind that the wars such groups fight have to be fought against other groups and thus become inescapably political: a contest of power. See Creveld, *Transformation*, pp. 124-191.

constellations). Outright military victory *à outrance* may be the most appropriate way of achieving one's object, but history shows that, equally, and frequently, it may not. Often the idea of the superiority of overwhelming force – the 'decisive or annihilation battle' – has prevailed where acceptance of the inherent relationship between politics and war is less well appreciated in the dominant strategic culture.¹⁹⁴ As some modern counterinsurgency operations reveal, the use of overwhelming force may prove enormously strategically counterproductive.¹⁹⁵ As the proverb has it: war is too important to be left to the generals.

The two types of policy

So, Clausewitz believed that, because war was not an autonomous phenomenon, to a considerable extent, 'the nature of the political aim, the scale of the demands put forward by either side, and the total political situation of one's own side, are all factors that in practice must decisively influence the conduct of war'.¹⁹⁶ In what way exactly? The answer is difficult to determine and Clausewitz never completed his ideas on this subject.¹⁹⁷ When one surveys the historical record one is struck by the vast possibility of the forms that political objectives can take and, as Clausewitz noted, 'The possible purposes...are too diverse to be enumerated.'¹⁹⁸ A further difficulty arises when we consider how difficult it often is to determine the true motives behind a given purpose (often not even

¹⁹⁴ This is largely assumed to be the case with the modern American Military. Weigley has demonstrated that, throughout most of its history, America has adopted the 'strategy of annihilation', with the aim of the direct destruction of the enemy's armed force. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. xxii. Also, we should note, it took Clausewitz a great deal of mental anguish to accept that other roads to success, other than the decisive battle, were possible and entirely rational, although it may be doubted that he ever truly abandoned the superiority of the annihilation battle. For further instances of this mentality, consider the ideas of Ferdinand Foch. See, Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, pp. 98-99.

¹⁹⁵ The French experience in Algeria and the American experience in Vietnam are the most obvious examples.

¹⁹⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 727.

¹⁹⁷ See Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz*, pp. 180-86; Christopher Bellamy, *Knights in White Armour: The New Art of War and Peace* (London: Pimlico, 1998) p. 26; and Honig, 'Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting', pp. 112-13. It is true that Clausewitz never fully articulated a 'strategy' of limited war – i.e. he did not provide clear indications of how exactly one was meant to fight a limited war. Could a politically limited war, for example, be fought by the use of overwhelming force and the complete destruction of the enemy as operational aims? This problem has occupied a number of modern commentators including those referenced here.

¹⁹⁸ Clausewitz quoted in Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 206.

perfectly understood by the actor in question). Indeed, Clausewitz notes that, in war ‘the facts are seldom fully known and the underlying motives even less so.’¹⁹⁹ For these reasons, there is little value in developing a schema of possible political purposes (which are almost endless): the problem is one of explaining and generalising about political behaviour and war, rather than providing a comprehensive classification of all its potential manifestations.²⁰⁰

Partly to overcome this problem Clausewitz began to develop a conceptual tool which allowed him to distinguish between two types of war according to the nature of their overriding purpose. In his note of 1827 he stated his intention to develop the idea that wars can essentially be either unlimited²⁰¹ – those fought ‘to overthrow the enemy’ and dictate terms: the ‘terrible battlesword’²⁰² – or limited – those fought for objectives to be achieved by negotiation or settlement: ‘the light, handy rapier.’²⁰³ In reality the two types encompass a enormous variety ‘ranging from a war of extermination down to simple armed observation’²⁰⁴ dependent on the particular circumstances that brought them into being (and so might best be conceived as points on a spectrum rather than two distinct types). In presenting the two types, Clausewitz did not deny that ‘between these two extremes lie numerous gradations.’²⁰⁵ Also, the concept is not intended as a rigid deterministic device, implying purpose alone imposes a certain form on any particular war. Nevertheless, the dual concept serves to clarify a vast diversity in reality. His basic contention was that wars fought on the basis of one or the other type would be pervaded by significantly differing imperatives.

¹⁹⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 181. Consider for example the ‘spectacular diversity of opinion among Americans about their own government’s motives in invading Iraq in 2003.’ Gwynne Dyer, *War: The Lethal Custom* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), p. 94.

²⁰⁰ Something, as we noted earlier, Jomini attempted in a limited fashion. As Chris Brown has noted, ‘classification is not the same as explanation’. Brown, *Understanding*, p. 76.

²⁰¹ It is important to be clear that unlimited war is very different to the idea of absolute war. In contrast to absolute war, which is a abstract fantasy, both unlimited and limited war exist in reality and it is the political object which determines one or the other. Unlimited wars, driven by extreme policy objectives, may approach the logical extreme.

²⁰² Clausewitz, ‘Note of 10 July 1827’, in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 77. As Howard notes, this was a distinction he utilised at an early stage of his studies, but it attained a greater significance in the process of his attempt to fashion a unity of his theory after 1827. Michael Howard, *Clausewitz: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 49.

²⁰³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 732.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁰⁵ As Howard states, ‘knowing that the requirements of policy may be almost infinitely various, war can surely be of any kind.’ Howard, *Clausewitz*, p. 53.

Wars fought for unlimited objectives, Clausewitz believed, will tend to encourage extremes. For Clausewitz, the campaigns of Napoleon were examples *par excellence* of this type.²⁰⁶ Of course, whether the rise to extremes actually occurs is a matter of circumstance: in some cases the opponent may rapidly succumb – with the harsh penalties that is likely to entail – but if the enemy chooses to resist, which can often be expected where survival is at stake, war will have a tendency to approach Clausewitz’s absolute concept. The sacrifices demanded of the opponent are total and so, if it wishes to prevent the loss entailed, only a correspondingly extreme effort will suffice.²⁰⁷ In unlimited wars, where the motives for war are ‘more powerful and inspiring’ the ‘closer will war approach its abstract concept, the more important will be the destruction of the enemy.’²⁰⁸ In such cases, the war may appear more military than political, but this is only due to an elision where policy is *seemingly* effaced by the military aspect and the overthrow of the enemy essentially becomes both political purpose and military aim. Nevertheless, both unlimited and limited wars are equally political.²⁰⁹

Instances of politically limited wars are endless.²¹⁰ The wars of eighteenth century Europe are often presented as classic examples, being greatly restricted in their aims for various contextual reasons, and which Clausewitz caricatured as ‘a somewhat stronger form of diplomacy, a more forceful method of negotiation.’²¹¹ Limited aims do not necessarily mean large battles will not

²⁰⁶ The precise character of the unlimited purpose (be it inspired by glory, racial supremacy, or ideology) is not crucial here; the paramount feature of the policy is its unlimited object – in terms of what is demanded of your opponent – which lends such wars their distinctive form.

²⁰⁷ Even if their own ends remain limited to pure survival, not the overthrow of the enemy in turn.

²⁰⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 99.

²⁰⁹ Crevelde argues that in a war of national existence the idea of war as an instrument becomes meaningless, because war ‘merges with policy, becomes policy, is policy.’ But Clausewitz, who had not only fought such a war and earlier held a more existential view of war, was well aware that this is just how such a war may appear. Yet, Clausewitz does not see this as an argument that such a war is any less political. Policy and war do indeed more or less coalesce, but the distinction remains underneath – only it is shrouded by the intensity of the conflict and its overwhelmingly military *character*. In such a case, policy approximates to survival and war is the only instrument that can achieve that object. Crevelde is not entirely mistaken (policy does almost become war), but the relationship does not disappear completely. Crevelde, *Transformation*, pp. 142-49.

²¹⁰ Perhaps the greatest executor of limited wars was Bismarck, who adeptly weighed up the balance of forces prior to engagement and ensured the diplomatic environment was suitably benign: the true *realpolitiker* and antithesis of a Napoleon or Hitler.

²¹¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 713.

occur or that they will be fought without ruthlessness.²¹² Indeed, a modest aim may best be served by a short unforgiving campaign to rapidly compel the enemy to negotiate.²¹³ Nevertheless, when engagements do occur they will generally tend to be restrained and there will be a greater proclivity on all sides to open negotiations when possible. Clausewitz states that, 'Once this influence of the political objective on war is admitted, as it must be, there is no stopping it; consequently we must also be willing to wage such minimal wars, which consist in merely threatening the enemy, with negotiations held in reserve.'²¹⁴ Where the object is slight it can be expected that both sides will be quicker to seek terms; even the victor in battle will generally prefer a favourable peace to risking further losses. In limited wars, 'the less will the military element's natural tendency to violence coincide with political directives...the conflict will *seem* increasingly political in character.'²¹⁵

The central point Clausewitz wished to establish was that the type of the political aim of each belligerent will be a powerful factor in shaping the character and conduct of war. However, understanding the objectives of either side – itself fraught with difficulties – is necessary but not sufficient. From an objective viewpoint, the policy of one side is not sufficient to determine the scale and magnitude of war. War, as Clausewitz repeatedly reminds us, is akin to duel, with competing sides creating a dynamic whole. Thus, the political object as a 'standard of measurement' only makes sense in the 'context of the two states at war.'²¹⁶ For instance, whilst one side may have only limited aims, there is no assurance that the enemy will follow and that 'the half-hearted war does not

²¹² For instance, despite the aims of both Russia and Japan being politically limited, some two million men were assembled in Manchuria in 1905. Bond describes the eighteenth century as an 'age of battles' with a higher ratio of casualties to the total of participants than in the Napoleonic wars. Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 14 and 96. The concept of limited war does not necessarily entail, for those caught up in them, that they any less horrific or intense.

²¹³ Ibid., p. 14. This was the likely calculus behind Israel's incursion into the Gaza Strip in late December 2008. The campaign claimed the deaths of over one thousand civilians, including many women and children. Although ostensibly the war was fought for the limited objective of stopping rocket fire into Israel by Hamas militants and also perhaps to send a message to Hamas supporters in Iran and Syria, rather than to entirely destroy Hamas as a political entity, Israel calculated – perhaps incorrectly – that an intensive and relentless military offensive would promptly compel Hamas to come to terms.

²¹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 729.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 99. Emphasis added.

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 90.

become a real war after all.²¹⁷ The true character of any war only results from the interaction of the opposing purposes of the belligerents: it thus takes two to fight a limited war. It is the manner in which purposes interact that is the true determinant of the character of any war.²¹⁸

The idea of politically limited war enabled Clausewitz to explain why wars rarely reached the extremes suggested by logic, where extraneous factors such as friction could not fully account for limitations in reality. Whether we fight on, sue for peace through negotiations, or surrender will be strongly determined by the object of the war and the value attached to it – it will remain the ultimate arbiter over each side's decisions whether the fight is worth the continued sacrifices and effort. The interaction of these considerations on either side will be the major determinant of the continuation, scope, and magnitude of hostilities. As Clausewitz notes,

Suppose one merely wants a concession from the enemy. One will only fight until some modest quid pro quo has been acquired, and a moderate effort should suffice for that. The enemy's reasoning will be much the same...Thus interaction, the effort to outdo the enemy, the violent and compulsive course of war, all stagnate for lack of real incentive. Neither side makes more than minimal moves, and neither side feels itself seriously threatened.²¹⁹

It is important to note that Clausewitz did not see policy as the sole determinant of war's character. We have already seen how war's own 'grammar' exerts a powerful influence on developments as the necessity of military victory often shapes the behaviour of armies, sometimes to the detriment of policy. Lawrence Freedman notes that, 'Military methods must be geared not only to the political stakes but also to the capacities and methods of the adversary. The political pressures may be towards minimum force but the

²¹⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 730.

²¹⁸ America, fighting for limited aims in south-east Asia, found itself strategically defeated by a Vietnamese force fighting for what were essentially unlimited objectives. As Stanley Karnow relates, the Communists saw 'the struggle against America and its South Vietnamese allies as another chapter in their thousand years of resistance to Chinese and, later, French rule. And they were prepared to accept unlimited losses to achieve their sacred objective.' Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1994), p. 20.

²¹⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 729.

military pressures may point in the opposite direction.’²²⁰ Furthermore, because war is pervaded by probabilities rather than necessity, belligerents may be compelled to sustain hostilities beyond what policy would rationally dictate in the hope of some future favourable turn of events, perhaps in the form of salvation through the entry of new allies or a debilitating split in the enemy alliance.²²¹ Yet, uncertainty is often the ally of peace where ends are limited: we dare not risk further fighting when the outcome is uncertain and continuing hostilities may be a worse option than surrender on terms, particularly if the enemy only demands limited sacrifices from us.

Moreover, the passions roused by war can lead to an intensification of war where policy would suggest otherwise, even when the odds are stacked against us or the original ends were minimal. As Clausewitz notes, such conditions are crucial, as ‘the same political object can elicit differing reactions from differing peoples, and even from the same people at different times.’²²² Elsewhere he states that ‘war and its forms result from ideas, emotions, and conditions prevailing at the time.’²²³ Limited wars are not immune from the play of passions: ‘Between two peoples and two states there can be such tensions, such a mass of inflammable material, that the slightest quarrel can produce a wholly disproportionate effect – a real explosion.’²²⁴ Thus, the impact of the two types of policy cannot be properly conceived in isolation from the other tendencies of the trinity. Still, Clausewitz believes policy remains the chief arbiter in this regard: passions are unlikely to be aroused to the extent of a true explosion where there is ‘not a policy of proportionate magnitude.’ Unlimited objectives tend to arouse and engage emotions much more so than limited ones: if policy aims are limited ‘the emotions of the masses will be little stirred.’²²⁵ Furthermore, it is likely that, in such situations, ‘a policy of maximum exertion would fail because of the domestic problems it would raise.’²²⁶

²²⁰ Lawrence Freedman, ‘The age of liberal wars’, in David Armstrong, Theo Farrell, and Bice Maiguashca (eds.), *Force and Legitimacy in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 103.

²²¹ For instance, consider Hitler in late 1945 and the belief that the alliance would break down because of the incompatibility of Soviet and Western interests.

²²² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 90.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 702.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 707.

The character of war generated by the nature of the purpose is somewhat relative and can be manifested in many different ways – it is not just a matter of casualty figures or the size of battles, and is contingent on a host of factors, nevertheless deriving principally from the basic political object. Unlimited aims will tend to produce wars recognisable in the fact of laws and norms contravened, extremes of brutality, attacks on civilians, and ‘the gloves are off’ approach to defeating the enemy. In limited wars such extremes are much less likely because the value placed on the object is much smaller, the passions less aroused, society less caught up in hostilities, negotiation or resolution much more probable, and the use of excessive force potentially counterproductive.

From a strategic perspective, it is vital for those conducting war to understand the extent of the opponent’s object because if the enemy aims at your destruction then plans for war would require very different considerations than if they were limited. A large part of the American failure in Vietnam, was the inability to understand that even though it may have believed it was fighting a politically limited war,²²⁷ its Vietnamese enemy certainly was not. Vietnamese forces were willing to sustain enormous casualty levels to ensure their political independence, whereas mounting US casualties turned opinion against a war that was deemed by large segments of the population as politically and strategically unnecessary.

The political web of war

A major implication of the assertion that war is a continuation of politics is that the panoply of perpetually shifting relations within, between, and beyond individual groups will impact on and shape the course of war. The political web within which war takes place can greatly influence the types of policies adopted, decisions taken, and actions initiated in war: as Echevarria notes, war and ‘policy is shaped by the processes and conditions within which it is developed, in a word

²²⁷ Reflecting terminology derived from the limited war and ‘flexible response’ doctrines developed by strategists during the 1950s and 1960s as a way of maintaining the utility of the military instrument in the context of the nuclear stand-off. Theorists of these strategies explicitly drew, somewhat inaccurately, on Clausewitz. There was an assumption that Clausewitz held that war could be limited and kept limited if policy wished it to be so. This ignored the multilateral dimension which emphasised the contingent nature of war, beyond the complete control of any single actor. See, Colin S. Gray, ‘What RAND Hath Wrought’, *Foreign Policy*, No. 4, Autumn 1971, pp. 111-29.

by politics.’²²⁸ This fact – perhaps underrated by Clausewitz, at least explicitly in *On War* – helps account for many otherwise inexplicable events and developments in past wars. Indeed, sometimes, action which makes sense militarily – perhaps as embodied in the standard principles of war – is apt to be entirely subverted by politics.

This is particularly relevant with respect to the manifold effects arising from internal politics. Decisions taken will not always be geared towards strategic or military imperatives, but might be dictated by industrial concerns, electoral politics, inter-service rivalry, or bureaucratic considerations. In such cases, ‘Political considerations that override the grammar of war may run counter to the accomplishment of policy aims.’²²⁹ A prominent instance of domestic politics driving military decisions is the phenomenon of external wars begun by states to stave off an impending domestic insurrection or to strengthen national unity.²³⁰ Such domestic political interests feed into the use of military force at various levels and at different times. In peacetime, debates between separate services over the allocation of limited defence budgets shapes the size, composition, and structure of the military instrument, which as a consequence may or may not be suited to actual strategic exigencies.

Such political dynamics compound the difficulty of arriving at a clear political purpose or in ensuring military operations are conducted according to achievable and realistic objectives. Where extraneous political concerns impinge on strategic decisions, soldiers can find themselves being sacrificed for the sake of a politician’s position in office, the profits of industrial contractors, or the continuance of amicable relations with allies (perhaps to ensure cooperation in other areas of interest wholly unconnected to the ostensible purpose of the war). It is important, however, to note that apparently extraneous political concerns may serve an important strategic purpose or one that is deemed important enough to override purely military concerns. During the American Civil War the Union launched arguably militarily wasteful campaigns to ensure Lincoln was re-elected, driven by the belief that victory could only be ensured with him at the helm.

²²⁸ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 74.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²³⁰ See Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 279.

Wars, or events within war, are often utilised as political tools for objectives that differ from proclaimed objectives. Whatever the form of such hidden motives, these simply reflect the political web in which war takes place and from which it cannot be isolated. These motives give policy its particular character, but they do not supplant its basic overarching relationship to war, which we have outlined above. War's instrumentality is not necessarily negated when the character of the policy changes or if the precise character of the political imperatives are different to those publicly stated.²³¹ This web of politics is something within which policymakers and commanders are inevitably entwined and have to face even as military events unfold. Developments in these areas can have a decisive impact on strategic outcomes. The cynical reasons for which force is often employed might degrade the purity of policy, but it remains policy nonetheless – warts and all – and will impact on war, potentially detrimentally.

Implications in theory

Based on these explorations we are now in a position to outline the central attributes of Clausewitz's conception of the relationship. A number of central implications arise and will be dealt with below.

The boundaries of policy and reason – the unstable instrument

This chapter has sought to underline the somewhat paradoxical impact of politics on war. On one level, policy provides war with a rational structure, whereby belligerents seek to attain their ends through the reasoned use of force. On the other hand, precisely because war is inherently political, it is embedded in what we have termed the 'political web of war', and this constitutes one of the greatest barriers to purely rational behaviour in war. As Echevarria neatly puts it, 'The influence of policy is...limited by the existing political conditions, in a word, by politics.'²³² It is ensconced within and impacted on by the whole range of

²³¹ See Gray, *Bloody*, p. 378.

²³² Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 95.

political conditions beyond the manipulation of actors – a substance ‘removed from means and purpose that can be steered by the will.’²³³

As noted, the primacy of policy has been overstated in the literature, with the result that some scholars, particularly during the Cold War, believed Clausewitz’s theory presented a doctrine which, if followed, would allow for the limitation of war – the use of force could be restricted ‘to a scale that is no greater than necessary to achieve the objectives at stake.’²³⁴ This interpretation has clouded Clausewitz’s true meaning and has focused too heavily on subordination over continuation. War is an instrument, but it is a notoriously ‘unstable instrument.’²³⁵ Clausewitz’s choice of the term ‘instrument’ is thus perhaps unfortunate. As Echevarria notes, ‘Politik must...understand that its instrument...is a dynamic one. War involves living forces rather than static elements; thus, it can change quickly and significantly in ways the logic of policy may not expect.’²³⁶ War is an uncertain, unsteady, and dangerous instrument that can often have effects entirely unintended by its users and is an activity that is very difficult to keep within rational bounds. Often the thread of reason may be only very thinly woven through the whole structure; the tapestry hangs together loosely.

How much policy dominates in any particular war at a particular time is a matter of circumstance. War, as Clausewitz wrote, only has an ‘*element* of subordination’ to policy. Policy is never tyrant: war has its own imperatives, requirements, and dynamic. Also, Echevarria is correct to remind us that war’s grammar ‘places as many restrictions on policy as grammar does on language.’²³⁷ In other words, policy must understand the limits of its instrument when determining objectives.

²³³ Herberg-Rothe, *Puzzle*, p. 142.

²³⁴ Osgood quoted in Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 87. It is quite clear, given the awful prospect of a conventional conflict escalating into all-out nuclear war, why theorists and strategists during the Cold War sought desperately to develop a theory, or even, doctrine, of limited war. Clausewitz certainly discussed limited war in an objective sense, but he did not provide concrete principles about how limited wars should be fought without the potential for escalation. He did not, because he recognised that there were many objective factors that subjective policy could not control. Any subjective doctrine would be liable to hijack by objective conditions, chance, passion, and the escalatory grammar of war. Those who criticise Clausewitz for not developing a theory of limited war perhaps misunderstand Clausewitz’s theoretical aims (as discussed in Chapter 2).

²³⁵ Smith, *On Clausewitz*, p. 105.

²³⁶ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 94.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Dynamic feedback

The analysis so far has treated the relationship between politics and war in a predominantly static and linear fashion to elucidate the basic ideas. As Alan Beyerchen notes ‘the conventional approach...envisions a compartmentalisation of politics and war in a linear sequence – first comes politics/policies, then war, then politics/policies again to make or maintain peace.’²³⁸ The concept of ‘subordination’ paints a picture of a one-way relationship whereby policy sets the goals for war to achieve and remains the chief consideration throughout, until the objective is either attained, lost, or some other marginal outcome is reached following hostilities. This is not the image which Clausewitz intended to convey and in fact there will be a constant, dynamic, and nonlinear interaction between politics, policy, and war: they interact in a permanent and complex feedback process. This tendency is not static in Clausewitz’s conception: as he notes, ‘the political situation can change from year to year.’²³⁹ Elsewhere, in an important sentence, Clausewitz notes that ‘the original political objects can greatly alter during the course of the war and may finally change entirely since *they are influenced by events and their probable consequences*.’²⁴⁰

Because the major lines that run through war are political, military developments will have political effects, which will impact on the decisions and calculations of political leaders. Thus, in war there is a constant interaction and interplay between politics, policy, and military developments, objectives and the use of force, ends and means. The incredibly complexity this observation encompasses in any particular case means that, in theoretical terms, all we can hope to achieve is to draw attention to the prominent characteristics of this interplay.

The concept of ‘continuation’ revealed more strongly that the interaction of belligerents continually creates new political realities. This idea becomes apparent when we consider developments in war and their wider political impact, which in turn can feed into military developments. Because new power

²³⁸ Alan Beyerchen, ‘Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery’. Available online at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Beyerchen/BeyerschenNonlinearity2.pdf>>, retrieved 20 April 2007.

²³⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 725.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 104. Emphasis added.

relationships are created during the course of war, the interests of third parties, domestic factions, and local populations might prompt them to intervene or react in one way or another – with all the political consequences such moves entail.²⁴¹ This is often the case when the military successes of one side encourages others to support its cause, confident in the belief they are backing the winning side and that they will gain politically as a result. Consider for instance, the Patriot's victories during the American War of Independence at the Battles of Saratoga in 1777 which brought the French into the war on their side, thus tipping the military balance greatly in their favour. Or consider the importance of the Union's victories in 1864 in prompting the British to abandon the idea of supporting the Confederates.

In this way, military developments may impact on political dynamics and feed back into policy choices, and they can do so in endlessly varying ways. It is important to remember that behind the abstract notion of 'policy' there are human decision-makers, whatever the institutional guise they may adopt. Those responsible for setting policy do not disappear at the outbreak of hostilities, but rather will have to respond, adapt, and reassess in the light of changed circumstances during the course of conflict. (Of course, stasis or paralysis are not excluded here as possibilities). Just as during the build up to war, if diplomacy fails to resolve the political dispute then policy may decide on war, so in reaction to events in war policy may seek a negotiated settlement with the enemy, decide to stay the course, forge new alliances, or take the war to other groups. Policy responds actively or passively to the effects of its instrument, whether threatened or employed.²⁴²

²⁴¹ Clausewitz discusses this in his chapter on 'The Culminating Point of Victory' and is worth quoting at length. He notes that one of the variables in determining the effects that military victories can have relates to the change in political alignments: 'If these changes, resulting from his victories, are likely to be to the disadvantage of the victor, they will probably be so in direct proportion to his advance – which is also the case of they are to his advantage. All depends on the existing political affiliations, interests, traditions, lines of policy, and the personalities of princes, ministers, favourites, mistresses, and so forth. The only general comment one can make is that after the defeat of a major power with lesser allies, these will quickly desert their leader. In this respect, the victor will then gain with every blow. If on the other hand, the defeated state is smaller, protectors will appear much sooner if its very existence is threatened.' *Ibid.*, p. 688.

²⁴² In some cases, we may witness great continuity of basic political object, even through intermittent periods of peace and war. For instance, some have suggested that for Britain and France between 1914 and 1945, there was an overarching continuity of policy: simply to check the 'German bid for continental if not world hegemony.' However, Howard correctly rejects this particular argument. The political calculus had actually changed significantly. Michael Howard, *Liberation or Catastrophe? Reflections on the History of the Twentieth Century* (London:

Ambiguity

Clausewitz believed that the influence of policy on war was essentially ambiguous in relation to the rise to extremes. This point is also implied in Gray's assertion that, 'The political context is by far the single most important factor in *promoting or restraining* the outbreak and conduct of war.'²⁴³ By stressing this tendency's ambiguity we simply mean that the political purpose neither necessarily causes a rise to extremes or limits war, but that it is the central, though not only, determinant of both. We should be careful not to mistake war's subordination to policy for the limitation of war, as some commentators have been wont to do. As Clausewitz observes, when policy requires an extreme effort, war will follow precisely because of its element of subordination. He states that, 'the closer...political probabilities drive war toward the absolute, the more the belligerent states are involved and drawn into its vortex.'²⁴⁴ Whilst in his final conception, absolute war is a logical fantasy, war in reality can nevertheless approach such extremes, as he believed he had witnessed during the Napoleonic Wars. Clausewitz's dialectical argument in Book 1, Chapter 1 is intended to demonstrate that both limited and unlimited wars are politically determined, whatever appearances may suggest.²⁴⁵

But, as noted, the matter is more complex than this as war often develops its own dynamics. Wars that begin for limited objects on either side, may rapidly create their own political dynamic disproportionate to the original cause of the war. In some cases, policy may simply lose control over its instrument and the military may pursue the defeat of the opponent regardless of political imperatives. The magnitude or scale of any war in reality, Clausewitz believed, is determined by forces other than the political object, such as the effects of friction, uncertainty, passion, social and cultural norms, that can cause the use of force to be modified. Even in wars where the political object is extreme, ethical norms and legal prohibitions should not be dismissed. As Echevarria puts it, 'the

Continuum, 2007), pp. 78-79. Policy stasis can perhaps be witnessed in relation to the long-running confrontation between Israel and Palestine since the mid-twentieth century. In other cases, the political object may change significantly, such as American objectives in Iraq since 2003.

²⁴³ Gray, *Bloody*, p. 374. Emphasis added.

²⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 706.

²⁴⁵ Herberg-Rothe, *Puzzle*, p. 115.

forces of violence, chance, and hostility can influence *Politik* to such a degree that policy may have to increase or reduce its aims.²⁴⁶ Nevertheless, in most cases, policy and the dynamics of the political interaction between belligerents will likely be the major determinant. In wars where policy essentially becomes a struggle for existence, those extraneous forces inhibiting extremes of violence are wont to be marginalised and only the inherent friction in war might serve to limit its ferociousness.

Also, policy does not necessarily exert a positive or negative effect in terms of strategic performance. The fact that Clausewitz firmly believed war should be subject to the guiding intelligence of policy, was not to say that policy is always wise or a positive strategic force. For instance, policy can be unclear, make unrealistic demands on the military, or the policy itself may be wrong. On the other hand, sensible and reasoned policy can have a greatly positive impact on strategic effectiveness – clear objectives provide the military with a firm idea of the kind of operations they need to undertake.

Reflections

Clausewitz believed that a rational thread, derived from the overarching direction of policy, ran through war, connecting the activities of individual combatants to the higher aims of the war.²⁴⁷ The extent to which this clear-headed influence is present greatly depends on unique circumstances and the character of the belligerents, but Clausewitz held it was mistaken to conceive of war as ever being conducted without some guiding purpose, even if it be shallow or vaguely articulated. Groups attempt to achieve their ends through the use of military

²⁴⁶ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 95.

²⁴⁷ As Moran notes, although Clausewitz states that, 'Policy, of course, will not extend its influence to operational details. Political considerations do not determine the posting of guards or the employment of patrols' and 'he seems to have regarded those limits as practical and prudential, rather than reflecting any theoretical or logical constraint.' Daniel Moran, 'The Instrument: Clausewitz on Aims and Objectives in War', in Strachan and Rothe, *Clausewitz*, p. 91. Given the potential of modern communications technology and the great impact that the actions of individual soldiers can have on political developments, the temptation and possibility for policy to determine the 'employment of patrols' has greatly increased – sometimes referred to as the 'long-screwdriver' problem. For an interesting discussion of these issues, at times directly employing Clausewitzian ideas see, Des Browne, 'Politics and the Art of War', Speech at Oxford University's 3rd annual lecture for the Oxford-Leverhulme programme on the 'Changing Character of War', 9 May 2007.

Available online at: <<http://ukingermany.fco.gov.uk/en/newsroom/?view=News&id=4616317>>, retrieved 13 January 2008.

means, yet, this is a highly problematical undertaking given the difficulty of translation between the two realms,²⁴⁸ the uncertainty surrounding all decisions, the unstable nature of the military instrument, and the unpredictable effects that any use of force entails. He did not, as some have maintained, believe that war could always be employed in purely rational ways in pursuit of purely rational objectives. The relationship between policy and war is certainly not linear, one-way, or narrowly deterministic, but rather reciprocal and dynamic in nature: there is a continual interplay between policy and war. Even if policy is definite about what it intends to achieve, the interactive dynamic of war can cause objectives to radically change during hostilities and the extent to which policy remains in control is highly contingent.

Placing emphasis on the political nature of war focuses our attention on the fundamental forces which underlie the use of organised force: the logic of the distribution of relative power between groups. Power may be manifested in radically different forms, but at heart it is about the ways in which social actors attempt to shape the context of their existence. Regardless of the precise motives involved, the use of force is political at least as far as change is resisted by others. When force is employed, the logic of politics does not cease at the outbreak of hostilities; it continues in its most potent, unpredictable, and complex manifestation. Sometimes the main political lines in war will be clear and distinct, at others they will be barely perceptible or shrouded by the brute clash of military forces. Often the political complexity can appear overwhelming, particularly when war is composed of myriad actors each pursuing divergent agendas; yet this simply reflects the reality of the complexity of political relationships. In war, the scales of political power are constantly weighed and re-weighed: victory is rarely final, and apparent military success can be promptly displaced by political failure.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ Clausewitz makes this point in Chapter 6B, Book 8: Only if statesmen look to certain military moves and actions to produce effects that are foreign to their nature do political decisions influence operations for the worse. In the same way as a man who has not fully mastered a foreign language fails to express himself correctly, so statesmen issue orders that defeat the purpose they are meant to serve.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 735.

²⁴⁹ The classic example being the French defeat in Algeria despite almost complete military victory over the FLN; the cost of military victory was political collapse. Also, of course, America was defeated in Vietnam despite its overwhelming tactical superiority. Colonel Harry Summers presents his famous conversation with a Vietnamese counterpart in 1975, which succinctly conveys the problem: "“You know you never defeated us on the battlefield” said the American colonel. The North Vietnamese colonel pondered this remark a moment. “That may

War is an instrument of policy, but not only that. It is also a continuation of the complex, contingent, and unpredictable web of political interactions through the medium of force. So, a paradoxical situation is apparent whereby war is imbued with rationality through its subordination to policy, whilst simultaneously deriving much of its uncertainty and instability from its nature as a continuation of wider political interactions. War, employed as a rational instrument, inevitably impacts upon power constellations at a variety of levels, over time, in endless ways which no leader can entirely control. Moreover, wider political considerations encourage decisions which do not correspond directly with objectives or do not make sense from a military perspective.

Here the connection with the other tendencies of the trinity must be emphasised. When policy employs war as a means, around every corner stalk war's fellow elements of chance and passion. Not only is *pure* rational action impossible in war, but everywhere, attempts to achieve rational outcomes can be thwarted by the play of chance and the influence of passions and irrational impulses. War is an instrument that can easily slip from the hands of those that wield it or, whilst solving some problems, can create others where least expected. Those contemplating war as a means to achieve their ends must understand the nature of their instrument and attempt to read the political landscape to ensure force is employed as to produce the desired effects, whilst limiting adverse or unexpected developments. Sometimes the alternatives may be stark – 'fight or die' – but even in such circumstances, when the decision is taken to fight, actors must make reasoned decisions in order to survive, as much as passion and desperation may dominate their behaviour.

In recent decades, Western states have struggled to employ their militaries as effective instruments of policy,²⁵⁰ primarily due to complex political conditions rather than any major military tactical or operational shortcomings.²⁵¹ Particularly in situations of insurgency and terrorism – the pre-eminent forms of

be so," he replied, "but it is also irrelevant." Harry Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2003), p. 1.

²⁵⁰ This is a central argument in Rupert Smith's, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2005).

²⁵¹ Some of the key aspects of that context include: the high demands for political and legal legitimacy in an era of the United Nations; the strong aversion to war amongst domestic and international opinion, the low public tolerance for casualties in 'wars of choice', and the difficulty of comprehending the complexity of local politics in what are usually expeditionary operations in foreign countries.

warfare currently faced by the West – politics is central: as Paul Cornish has recently argued, counterinsurgency ‘must be political first, political last, political always.’²⁵² Force can be an extremely blunt instrument in dealing with such forms of organised violence and care is required to avert unintended consequences: the use of overwhelming force may not be the most suitable solution. This Clausewitz recognised in an era dominated by the annihilation battle – as exemplified by Napoleon – and it is testament to his searching intellect that he saw beyond dominating impressions to comprehend that, in war, politics is ‘the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching’ consideration.²⁵³

²⁵² Paul Cornish, ‘The United States and counterinsurgency: ‘political first, political last, political always’’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1, January 2009, p. 79.

²⁵³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 100.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chance: The Realm of Uncertainty

Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on that strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The statesman who yields to war fever must realise that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events...always remember that however sure you are that you can easily win, that there would not be a war if the other man did not think he also had a chance.

Winston Churchill

Think, too, of the great part that is played by the unpredictable in war: think of it now, before you are actually committed to war. The longer a war lasts, the more things tend to depend on accidents. Neither you nor we can see them: we have to abide their outcome in the dark.

Thucydides

We do know of certain knowledge that he [Osama Bin Laden] is either in Afghanistan, or in some other country, or dead.

Donald Rumsfeld

This tendency of Clausewitz's trinity concerns 'the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam.'¹ War takes place in a climate of uncertainty as each belligerent attempts to overcome the other: neither side can be entirely sure of their opponent's next move, and it may even be doubted whether either side knows what its own will be. Clausewitz explains how war, like 'no other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance' and that 'there is an interplay of possibilities, probabilities, good luck and bad that weaves its way throughout the length and breadth of the tapestry.'² For Clausewitz, it was principally the commander and his army that must operate in this climate of danger, uncertainty, and friction. The commander must attempt to limit the effects of fear and chance through the 'play

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993), p. 101.

² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

of courage and talent.’ It was Sun Tzu who famously commented that ‘if you know others and know yourself, you will not be imperilled in a hundred battles.’³ Clausewitz would have sympathised with the sentiment expressed in this aphorism, but was profoundly pessimistic about the possibility of achieving the measure of certainty on which it depends.

This provides us with a sense of the meaning of this tendency, yet, as with the other elements of the trinity, it carries a great deal more weight than this basic introduction would suggest. This tendency of ‘chance and uncertainty’ draws upon many other important ideas in his work – such as those concerned with strategy, the engagement, genius, or military virtues – and as with other insights, may appear to be little more than an expression of Clausewitz’s ‘common-sense bordering on wit’,⁴ however this ignores the fact that others have denied, ignored, or overlooked its inclusion in theory as an essential element of the nature of war. Earlier thinkers had either marginalised its importance or subscribed so fully to its force that they abandoned all hope of producing concrete theory. Moreover, rejection of this element is by no means confined to theorists of Clausewitz’s era. Indeed, its anticipated negation represents the basis of an entire school of thought in modern Western military circles, primarily in the US, which contends that rapid technological developments have engendered a so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) that tantalisingly promises to dispel Clausewitz’s fog of war.⁵ Gray usefully reminds us that, ‘commonplace though emphasis upon the role of chance in war may appear, such emphasis is highly unusual among strategic theorists.’⁶

Humans often like to feel in control of their environment, to be the masters of their fate,⁷ and may consequently feel uncomfortable when fortune, as Machiavelli suggested, appears as a fiendish Goddess wanting to be ‘mistress of

³ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. T. Cleary (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), p. 82.

⁴ Marx quoted in Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 13.

⁵ The popular classic in this field is Bill Owens, *Lifting the Fog of War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

⁶ Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 95.

⁷ W. E. Henley’s Stoical poem ‘Invictus’ ends with the lines: ‘It matters not how strait the gate/How charged with punishments the scroll/I am the master of my fate/I am the captain of my soul.’ A. P. Wavell, *Other Men’s Flowers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), p. 90.

all human affairs,'⁸ when things have to be left to chance, or the course of events cannot be reliably predicted. Worse, some refuse to accept that anything is left to chance. Such thinking can lead to dangerous forms of strategic myopia, historical myth,⁹ and misunderstanding of war's true nature. Clausewitz's work forces us to confront reality (in both theoretical and strategic terms) and to emphasise the demands chance and uncertainty places on human action, will, and creativity.

So, have changes in warfare since his time rendered his insights obsolete? How does this tendency reveal itself through the various actors in war: was he right to claim that this tendency concerns mainly the commander and his army, or should we conceive of a more inclusive conception? To answer such questions, we need to develop a rigorous understanding of this element of the trinity. Its precise meaning, connection to the other elements of the trinity, and form of its manifestation in reality are all contested and complex issues that thus require detailed analysis and clarification.

The chapter will begin by considering some of the influences, precedents, and experiences that contributed to Clausewitz's thought on the subject and shaped the ultimate form it would take. It will then move on to combine textual interpretation of Clausewitz's work with secondary interpretations, historical evidence, and modern scholarship to develop a comprehensive conception of this tendency, and one that retains its relevance in the light of modern warfare. Finally, it will consider some of the theoretical implications of this analysis.

Background, influences and precedents

As Daniel Moran has noted, it is extremely difficult to speak with confidence about the exact intellectual influences that contributed to Clausewitz's

⁸ Quoted in Hanna F. Pitkin, *Fortune is a Woman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 153.

⁹ Howard explains how historical myths are often created to boost morale and massage narratives of national greatness. Successes that were due more to exceptional luck may be written in terms of brilliant generalship. When myths are uncovered a 'process of disillusionment' often ensues. Michael Howard, *Causes of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 190.

conception of the role of chance and probability in war.¹⁰ The origins of the ideas are certainly somewhat opaque and diverse: aspects of Clausewitz's own experiences and contemporary events merge with imagery reflective of Romantic literature; humanistic renaissance philosophy finds its place next to concepts drawn from the mechanical sciences and physics. Yet, despite this eclecticism, the following analysis draws attention to three areas for which there is strong reason to believe that they contributed importantly to the development of his ideas: these are, precedents in existing military theory; Machiavelli; and Clausewitz's own experiences of war.

Chance and uncertainty in existing military theory

Clausewitz adamantly believed that earlier Enlightenment theorists had not devoted enough attention to the concepts of chance and uncertainty. Rationalist theorists preferred to emphasise those aspects of war that were tangible, controllable, and susceptible to concrete laws, or that dealt with mathematical, algebraical and geometrical factors. However, this does not mean such thinkers, who, like Clausewitz, had often experienced war first-hand, were completely blind to the existence of chance. Rather, it was the nature of their theoretical approach that precluded the incorporation of these factors in their systems: a form of 'methodological determinism.'¹¹ As Gat states, 'The Enlightenment thinkers were quite aware of the factors of uncertainty but focused on what they considered to be suitable for intellectual formulation.'¹² Clausewitz explicitly attacked such views when he stated that those thinkers aimed at 'fixed values; but everything in war is uncertain and calculations have to be made with variable quantities.'¹³ Whilst some thinkers accepted that chance impacts on war, they failed to formulate such ideas into clear concepts and integrate them into theory, which ultimately led to a significant disconnect between their ideas and reality. As Clausewitz noted, such factors were vital because they were ultimately what

¹⁰ Daniel Moran, 'Strategic Theory and the History of War', Naval Postgraduate School. Available online at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Bibl/Moran-StrategicTheory.pdf>>, retrieved 8 August 2007, p. 9.

¹¹ Jerome G. Manis and Bernard N. Meltzer, 'Chance in Human Affairs', *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 1994, p. 53.

¹² Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 187.

¹³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 156.

differentiated ‘real war from war on paper’¹⁴ and which therefore theory must tackle if it is to remain relevant. As Alan Beyerchen comments, ‘Facing up to the intrinsic presence of chance, complexity, and ambiguity in war is imperative. For Clausewitz, this is preferable to the risk of being blind-sided by the strictures of a theory artificially imposed on the messiness of reality in the name of clarity.’¹⁵

The Enlightenment theorists’ failure to seriously consider and analyse chance as a central element of war mirrors a disposition, common amongst Ancient philosophers such as Aristotle,¹⁶ which marginalised those aspects of the world seemingly unsuceptible to scientific explanation, and treated them as phenomena beyond laws of cause and effect. As philosopher of science, Henri Poincaré noted, ‘the ancients distinguished between the phenomena which seemed to obey harmonious laws, established once for all, and those that they attributed to chance, which were those that could not be predicted because they were not subject to any law.’¹⁷ This ontological position might be characterised as a form of intellectual denial – the refusal to contemplate that which you cannot control or systematically explain. Theory would only concern itself with that which was explicable through observable laws. Both Ancient and Enlightenment thinkers, for comparable reasons (although Enlightenment thinkers generally believed in universal cause and effect), exhibited a similar reaction to chance: theoretical denial, or what today we might term ‘cognitive dissonance.’¹⁸

Early Enlightenment military theorists, who were determined to reduce warfare to a system of rules, began by focusing on those areas which were most

¹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 138.

¹⁵ Alan Beyerchen, ‘Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery’. Available online at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Beyerchen/BeyerschenNonlinearity2.pdf>>, retrieved 20 April 2007.

¹⁶ Aristotle held that there are accidental phenomena, or exceptions to rules, in nature that are not subject to scientific knowledge – ‘that there is no knowledge of the accidental is clear; for all knowledge deals either with what holds sway or with what holds for the most part’ – but he did not claim accidental events lacked cause, rather they are explained by the peculiarities of the case. Science does not deal with the accidental because it requires regularity. Jonathan Barnes, *Aristotle: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 90-91.

¹⁷ Henri Poincaré, *Science and Method*, trans. Francis Maitland (Courier Dover Publications, 2003), p. 64.

¹⁸ As Booth explains, cognitive dissonance results because, ‘Individuals do not like the psychological discomfort which comes from having ‘dissonant’ thoughts, images and attitudes. Consequently they employ a range of techniques to reject or avoid discrepant ‘cognitions’. Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 25.

susceptible to precise calculation. They tended to start from 'the bottom up', in the sense of developing systems directed mainly at tactical matters or 'fields where the enemy's independent will did not have to be taken into account', rather than at the more complex and intangible problems associated with strategy.¹⁹ Foremost amongst these was the science of siege warfare.²⁰ Although an almost permanent feature of war from the time of Jericho,²¹ siege warfare had become an increasingly dominant feature of the western experience of war²² and, indeed, by the eighteenth century, warfare appeared to be little more than an 'interminable succession of sieges.'²³ For a variety of reasons, during this time armies were usually kept close to heavily fortified positions.²⁴ The study of siege warfare encouraged the belief that theory could confine itself to mathematical prescriptions that would leave almost nothing to chance.²⁵ In the seventeenth century, Louis XIV's celebrated military engineer, Marshal

¹⁹ Martin van Creveld, *The Art of War: War and Military Thought* (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2005), p. 78.

²⁰ Strachan notes that the belief that war could be treated as a predictable science derived from 'the dominance of tactics in military thought, and in particular the importance of siegecraft, in itself one of the most exact procedures in battlefield techniques.' Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Kings Lynn: Routledge, 2006), p. 5.

²¹ Toby McLeod and Richard Holmes, 'Fortification and siegecraft', in Richard Holmes (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 308.

²² John Childs, 'The Military Revolution I: The Transition to Modern Warfare', in Charles Townshend (ed.), *The Oxford History of Modern War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 20-21. The end of the fifteenth century and the start of the sixteenth was a period which saw the introduction of mobile siege artillery and the bastion.

²³ Henry Guerlac, 'Vauban', in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 73. This point is also made by Howard who states that improvements in the art of fortifications in the eighteenth century 'made it possible to block major roads and often reduced campaigns to prolonged siege warfare.' Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War* (London: Profile Books, 2001), p. 23.

²⁴ Foremost amongst the reasons were the widespread distaste for roving warfare following the destructive Thirty Years War, the rising cost of armies, the heavy dependency on cumbersome baggage trains, and the need to sustain the morale of uncommitted troops by keeping them satisfied with a constant food supply. R. R. Palmer, 'Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bülow: From Dynastic to National War', in Paret, *Makers*, p. 94. Howard notes how any advance into enemy territory meant that any fortresses would have to be either invested or masked in order to ensure the safety of lines of communication. Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 36. These issues are touched on by Clausewitz in his chapter on 'Maintenance and Supply' in Book 5, *On War*, pp. 394-96.

²⁵ This belief was common from the late fifteenth century when the art of fortification became increasingly dominated by geometrical and mathematical approaches. Clausewitz himself acknowledged that siege warfare was primarily a matter of mathematics and geometry. In Book 3, Chapter 15 he states that 'the extent to which geometry...can become a dominant principle is shown in the art of fortification, in which geometry applies to almost everything, large or small...In field fortification and in the theory of entrenched positions and their attack, the lines and angles of geometry rule like judges who will decide the contest.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 251.

Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban was hugely influential in systematising the theory of fortification and siegecraft in this manner.²⁶

In the realm of fortification Vauban believed he had banished uncertainty – he purported to have ‘discovered an infallible method of defending a fortress, but never disclosed what it was’²⁷ whilst also (somewhat paradoxically) claimed to have devised a plan for the besieging army, offering ‘an almost certain breakthrough with little bloodshed.’²⁸ Although Vauban was not simply a gifted military engineer – he also considered the role of fortresses as part of the larger strategic picture²⁹ – the selectivity of his theory is clear and thus, the extent to which uncertainty in war could be eliminated through application of his theory would necessarily be limited.³⁰ Indeed, Henry Guerlac suggests there is evidence that Vauban himself, toward the end of his life, doubted the strategic importance of fortification vis-à-vis the main army.³¹ The case of Vauban leads us to emphasise the fundamental Clausewitzian, and indeed modern point, that chance pertains to war in all its diverse dimensions; being master of one’s fate in a single, or even many particular fields does not preclude the continued play of chance when war is considered holistically.

Following Vauban’s precedent, theorists such as Count Turpin de Crisse developed operational plans based on a spatially enlarged version of Vauban’s siegecraft which he claimed, if followed, would make success almost certain.³² Later theorists such as Guibert and Bülow, although army officers by training, had little experience of command in war³³ and were thus in a poor position to appreciate the existence and effect of chronic uncertainty. This is reflected in Bülow’s concentration on geometrical lines of operation, whereby elaborate strategic preparation and planning well before battle would serve to reduce ‘the

²⁶ Guerlac, ‘Vauban’, p. 79.

²⁷ Richard Holmes, ‘Vauban, Marshal Sébastien le Prestre de’ in Holmes, *The Oxford Companion*, p. 946. Frederick the Great also approached campaigns in a manner that reflected siegecraft on a grander scale. Jay Luvaas, ‘The Great Military Historians’, in John E. Jessop and Robert W. Coakley, *A Guide to the Study and Use of Military History* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1988), p. 71.

²⁸ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 37.

²⁹ See Guerlac, ‘Vauban’, pp. 83-90.

³⁰ Although there is certainly evidence to suggest that in his particular field his ideas had extremely wide application. For instance, it has been suggested that German defences on the Western front in 1916 were modelled on Vauban’s designs. Luvaas, ‘The Great Military Historians’, p. 70.

³¹ Guerlac, ‘Vauban’, p. 90.

³² Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 39.

³³ Palmer, ‘Dynastic to National War’, p. 95.

element of pure chance that Frederick [the Great] had feared in it.’³⁴ Armed with such principles he believed that planning could become ‘more fruitful, prediction somewhat more possible, warfare more of a ‘science.’³⁵ So, chance, by default, was virtually absent from these theories.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to claim that all previous thinkers had not recognised the difficulties that chance presented for theory, even if they continued to display the ancients’ proclivity for intellectual side-stepping by recognising the problem and then proceeding to ignore it, like sweeping rubbish under the carpet. For instance, Jomini did recognise uncertainty as ‘one of the chief causes of the great difference between the theory and the practice of war.’³⁶ As Echevarria notes, Jomini did not ‘necessarily assume a world without friction. Instead, his underlying assumption is that if a commander were to hold fast to the proposed principles, and use them as guidelines, he would succeed in the face of the confusion and chaos of battle.’³⁷ Furthermore, Jomini makes the point that if success was achieved by chance, then it would be chance action in line with principles, nothing else.³⁸ Clausewitz believed theorists like Jomini directed their principles towards ‘unilateral activity’ and considered only factors that ‘could be mathematically calculated.’³⁹ They thus formulated wholly ‘lopsided principle[s] that could never govern a real situation.’⁴⁰

Before both Jomini and Clausewitz, Raimondo Montecuccoli, who, despite the fact that he had ‘hoped that his axioms would make the conduct of

³⁴ Palmer, ‘Dynastic to National War’, p. 117.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 117.

³⁶ Jomini states that ‘it is a very easy matter for a school-man to make a plan for outflanking a wing or threatening a line of communications upon a map, where he can regulate the positions of both parties to suit himself; but when he has opposed to him a skilful, active, and enterprising adversary, whose movements are a perfect riddle, then his difficulties begin, and we see an exhibition of the incapacity of an ordinary general with none of the resources of genius.’ No doubt Clausewitz would have agreed with almost every word, and this underlines the fact that in some respects, the two writers shared more in common than is often granted. Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Texas: El Paso Norte Press, 2005), p. 215. Originally published in 1836, after Clausewitz’s work had been published in 1832, there is a possibility Jomini incorporated or borrowed some of the ideas Clausewitz discussed in *On War*.

³⁷ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 108.

³⁸ He states, ‘Genius has a great deal to do with success, since it presides over the *application of recognised rules*, and seizes, as it were, all the subtle shades of which their application is susceptible. But in any case, the man of genius does not act contrary to the rules.’ Quoted in Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 114. Emphasis added.

³⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 155.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 156.

operations predictable’⁴¹, at least recognised the difficulty of his objective and held that ‘it was impossible to calculate all factors in advance and some matters ‘should be left to fortune,’ because in war ‘he who worries about everything achieves nothing; he who worries about too little deceives himself.’⁴² Also, the qualities Montecuccoli believed a commander should possess reflected the attributes Machiavelli associated with *virtù*, such as courage, fortitude, energy and determination:⁴³ all characteristics that largely presume the existence of uncertainty, chance, and danger in war. Likewise, Saxe recognised that often outcomes will be ‘dependent upon the favor of fortune, which sometimes is very inconstant’⁴⁴ and that, as a result, commanders require courage and intelligence, ‘a talent for sudden and appropriate improvisation’, and the ability ‘to see the opportunity and to know how to use it.’⁴⁵

Yet Montecuccoli and de Saxe failed to grasp or sufficiently articulate, as Clausewitz subsequently would, the critical implications of these insights for theory. Chance could not simply be viewed as something incidental to theory, but was in fact central to it. As Daniel Moran notes, when it comes to formulating theory, even those who might be fully aware of war’s uncertain nature,

might feel that the surest path to clarity requires that incidental difficulties be ignored, in the same way that a scientist seeking a constant pattern or signal within a mass of data is entitled, indeed required, to ignore the ‘noise’ that surrounds it. For Clausewitz it was unrealistic to adopt such an attitude to war, in which the effects of chance are so profound that they become the signal, the central reality, and not an exogenous variable to be discounted.⁴⁶

Given these theorists’ tendency to marginalise chance in their theories it is hardly surprising that detailed discussions of the qualities of genius are largely absent from their work or only mentioned in passing. Previous thinkers either devoted little attention to this subject or situated it in a ‘sublime’ realm

⁴¹ Gunther E. Rothenberg, ‘Maurice of Nassau, Gustavus Adolphus, Raimondo Montecuccoli, and the ‘Military Revolution’ of the Seventeenth Century’, in Paret, *Makers*, p. 56.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁴ Maurice de Saxe, *Reveries on the Art of War*, trans. and ed. Thomas R. Phillips (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), p. 18.

⁴⁵ Saxe, *Reveries*, pp. 117-19.

⁴⁶ Daniel Moran, ‘Strategic Theory and the History of War’, p. 8.

presumed to be ‘beyond’ theory. When war is deemed to be determined by rational laws, what role is there for genius when presumably the enemy will submit following the application of logical principles? Such wars would be decided by superior algebra rather than creative genius. This characteristic of rationalist theory led to a curious position, which Clausewitz would later mock, whereby anything not clearly explicable through ‘correct principles’ must be due to the workings of sublime genius which is able to spurn the rules: such transcendental talent was deemed unfathomable. As Echevarria states, ‘Enlightenment writers tended to place genius outside the realm of what could be understood scientifically. They regarded genius as a rare, inexplicable, and therefore inconvenient phenomenon.’⁴⁷ So, it was primarily the failure of rationalist thinkers to fully accept or work through the implications of chance, that entailed a highly distorted conception of genius, and which Clausewitz would seek to rectify.

However, at the other extreme, the increasingly dominant Romantic world-view depicted war as ‘the sphere of clashing wills, rising emotions, uncertainty, and confusion...diverse complexity and endless confusion; [that] could only be mastered by the general’s practical genius and iron will.’⁴⁸ The *Sturm und Drang* writers emphasised the play of chance in their works, as well as the subjective creative will that must overcome it. This is a dominant theme in Schiller’s *Wallenstein*⁴⁹ which was one of Clausewitz’s favourite works.⁵⁰ That Clausewitz’s own inquiries into the psychological and intellectual faculties of great commanders – such as a Gustavus Adolphus, Frederick the Great, or Napoleon – often stressed character and spirit over education or cognitive ability, betrays a debt to this Romantic spirit.⁵¹

Also, in the vein of Romantic thought, Berenhorst’s work articulated a view of war determined purely by the contingent, exceptional, and

⁴⁷ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 102.

⁴⁸ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 315.

⁴⁹ Friedrich Schiller, *The Robbers and Wallenstein* (London: Penguin, 1979). In his work on the Campaign of 1812 Clausewitz likens General Yorck to Wallenstein whilst describing the negotiations that led to Yorck’s decision to detach his Prussian force from the *Grand Armée*. Carl von Clausewitz, ‘The Campaign of 1812 in Russia’, in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 194.

⁵⁰ Gat, *Military Thought*, pp. 181-82.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

unpredictable.⁵² As Katherine Herbig notes, he ‘threw up his hands at the expanded scope for chance generated by new technologies and declared that all war was chaos.’⁵³ He held that, ‘far from being scientific, war was anarchic, dominated by accident...Efforts to control, let alone abolish, this primeval wildness were absurd.’⁵⁴ Aspects of this tendency of the trinity certainly suggest Clausewitz was at least sympathetic to the causes of Berenhorst’s despair. Yet, whilst appreciating the importance of these factors, Clausewitz would not follow Berenhorst in his Romantic submission to the caprice of fortune and, as Echevarria notes, Clausewitz’s conception of genius differed from that of the Romantics. For instance, where ‘Goethe’s genius acted spontaneously... Clausewitz’s genius took action only after correctly assessing the overall situation.’⁵⁵ Clausewitz’s was an altogether more serious, balanced, and cerebral genius, that a true Romantic would perhaps have scorned. The teaching of Scharnhorst may have been crucial in shaping Clausewitz’s ideas in this respect. Paret notes that, even though the Berlin Academy was still teaching the Enlightenment dogma that sound theory could eliminate chance, Scharnhorst, its new director, had long since rejected this notion and was encouraging his students to consider the more realistic notion of ‘the ability of theory to help men deal with surprise, to help them exploit the unforeseen.’⁵⁶

So, in general terms there was either a perceptible avoidance of the subject of chance in existing theory, or where it was considered, it was marked by an overemphasis on the uncontrollable, chaotic nature of war, or an overly sentimental conception of genius. Nevertheless, some of the ideas that Clausewitz would ultimately develop are detectable. Building on these precedents, and encouraged by Scharnhorst, Clausewitz would emphasise the operation of chance in theory and develop a conception which represented neither a capitulation to fortune nor an overoptimistic belief in theory’s ability to overcome it. It appears Clausewitz had to reach further back in time to find a thinker – Machiavelli – more in tune with his own ideas, who had appreciated

⁵² Michael Howard, *Clausewitz: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 23.

⁵³ Katherine L. Herbig, ‘Chance and Uncertainty in *On War*’, in Michael I. Handel (ed.), *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 98.

⁵⁴ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 202.

⁵⁵ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 112.

⁵⁶ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 71.

more fully the importance and implications of chance in war, and was less inhibited by the blinkering strictures of Enlightenment theoretical standards. Clausewitz was to formulate a conception of chance which was strongly Machiavellian in form and indeed, was greatly influenced by the Florentine's ideas.

Fortune and virtue in Machiavelli

We know that Clausewitz was an avid reader of Machiavelli⁵⁷ and believed that 'his judgement in military matters is very sound.'⁵⁸ It is perhaps commonplace to associate the two thinkers for their pronounced political realism, yet another important common feature deserves attention. Machiavelli's rendering of *fortuna* and *virtù* – which pervade all his major works⁵⁹ – furnished Clausewitz with the conceptual keys to his analysis of chance and genius. As such, these ideas form a common thread running from Seneca and Plutarch⁶⁰ to Machiavelli, and from him through Montecuccoli and Scharnhorst to Clausewitz.⁶¹ *Fortuna* for Machiavelli held a similar meaning to the 'chance' employed by Clausewitz, in essence referring to the incalculable and the fortuitous, although there was probably more of a cosmic element in Machiavelli.⁶² Machiavelli, like Clausewitz, believed that, 'The continued existence of struggles and uncertainties patterns the character and the methods of war: there is no safe

⁵⁷ Peter Paret writes that, 'As a student in Berlin, Clausewitz had read Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and *Arte della Guerra*... Either during those years or soon after the war he had also read *The Prince*'. Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 169.

⁵⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, trans. Leslie J. Walker (London: Penguin, 2003); *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1999); and *The Art of War*, trans. Ellis Farnsworth (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001).

⁶⁰ Machiavelli was heavily influenced by Plutarch, particularly with respect to these issues. In Discourse 1 of Book 2 Machiavelli notes, 'Many are of the opinion, and among them Plutarch, a writer of great weight, that the Roman people was indebted for the empire it acquired rather to fortune than virtue.' Machiavelli, *Discourses*, p. 270.

⁶¹ This of course reflected Machiavelli's self-confessed admiration for the ancients, who were almost obsessed with the idea of fortune. Machiavelli notes how they erected more temples to Fortune than to any other god. Machiavelli, *Discourses*, p. 270. For a brief but enlightening comparison of the ideas of Seneca and Machiavelli see Neal Wood, 'Some Common Aspects of the Thought of Seneca and Machiavelli', *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Spring, 1968, pp. 11-23.

⁶² In *The Art of War* he describes Fortune as a 'fickle and inconstant' deity. However, his use of such terminology is more reflective of the prevailing idiom than entailing any divine significance. His chance is properly understood as a secular phenomenon notwithstanding the deceptive imagery he employs. Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, p. 110.

course.’⁶³ Neal Wood notes that for Machiavelli, ‘In no other human situation are chance, accident, and uncertainty...so prominent as in the peril and hardship of military encounter.’⁶⁴ Clausewitzian and Machiavellian conceptions of chance also correspond in the essential ambiguity they ascribe to the concept: in Machiavelli’s ‘Tercets’, fortune has two faces, one fierce and one mild.⁶⁵

In the penultimate chapter of *The Prince* Machiavelli notes how many people in his own times, because of ‘the great variations and changes, beyond human imaginings’, had come to believe that ‘there is no point sweating over things, but that one should submit to the rulings of chance.’ Machiavelli does not subscribe to this fatalistic view, but instead proposes a compromise that allows for the operation of human will: ‘fortune is probably arbiter of half the things we do, leaving the other half or so to be controlled by ourselves.’⁶⁶ Machiavelli did not share the widespread contemporary belief that man is entirely in the hands of *Fortuna*.⁶⁷

This amalgam of chance and human will broadly reflects the duality that Clausewitz proposes, for instance when he states that ‘with uncertainty in one scale, courage and self-confidence must be thrown into the balance.’⁶⁸ Furthermore, Machiavelli explains how fortune is not a wholly overpowering force; like a violent raging river, one can still take precautions to control its power.⁶⁹ Here, both share the belief that in order to face the vicissitudes of chance, men must be able to adapt to changing times because ‘fortune is changeable whereas men are obstinate in their ways, men prosper so long as fortune and policy are in accord, and where there is a clash they fail.’⁷⁰ Those who learn how to handle fortune can reap great benefits. In what Quentin

⁶³ Gilbert, ‘Machiavelli: The Renaissance of the Art of War’, in Paret, *Makers*, p. 24.

⁶⁴ This was an idea Machiavelli shared with Seneca, who thought *virtus* a ‘quality most characteristically displayed under battlefield conditions.’ Neal Wood, ‘Seneca and Machiavelli’, pp. 15 and 20.

⁶⁵ Pitkin, *Fortune*, p. 144.

⁶⁶ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 79.

⁶⁷ Gilbert, ‘Machiavelli’, p. 24.

⁶⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 97.

⁶⁹ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 80. This is a metaphor Machiavelli also utilises in his ‘Tercets on Fortune’, see Pitkin, *Fortune*, p. 147. In fact, Clausewitz employs a similar metaphor in his letter to Fichte when he states, ‘I have seen the traditional opinions and forms among which I grew up come apart like rotten timber, and collapse in the swift stream of events.’ Carl von Clausewitz, ‘Letter to Fichte’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 280. Seneca also compared fortune to ‘a river sweeping all mankind before it.’ Wood, ‘Seneca and Machiavelli’, p. 16. The shared imagery used by the three thinkers is striking.

⁷⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 82.

Skinner describes as an ‘erotic twist’,⁷¹ Machiavelli declares that ‘fortune is a woman’ and as such one can only ‘command her with greater audacity.’⁷²

The key for Machiavelli is acting at the right time, when fortune favours you – what we might term opportunism. As he states, ‘Nothing is of greater importance in time of war than knowing how to make the best of a fair opportunity when it is offered’⁷³ and that ‘it is better to try fortuna while she is still favourable than to try nothing and allow her surely to destroy you.’⁷⁴ This idea is also found in *The Prince*, where Machiavelli explains that outstanding princes ‘do not seem to have from fortune anything other than opportunity. Fortune, as it were, provided the matter but they gave it its form; without opportunity their prowess would have been extinguished, and without such prowess the opportunity would have come in vain.’⁷⁵ So, Machiavelli’s insights helped Clausewitz develop a conception of chance which was, if not an unambiguously positive force, at least malleable in the hands of great ability.

The qualities that enable men to face fortune and make the most of opportunities are encapsulated in Machiavelli’s concept of *virtù*. Here there is a striking parallel with Clausewitz’s discussion of genius. These similarities are noted by Neal Wood in his superb introduction to *The Art of War*, which concludes that Clausewitz’s,

treatment of the moral factors in war provides the most striking parallel to the precepts of Machiavelli. The analysis of the qualities of generalship and of military virtue can be interpreted as an illuminating commentary upon Machiavelli’s concept of *virtù*. Since war is conceived of by Clausewitz as a ‘perpetual conflict with the unexpected,’

⁷¹ Quentin Skinner, *Machiavelli: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 33. Skinner quotes a letter Machiavelli wrote which superbly conveys this idea: ‘“Nature”, he declares, “has given every man a particular talent and inspiration” which “controls each one of us”. But “the times are varied” and “subject to frequent change”, so that “those who fail to alter their ways of proceeding” are bound to encounter “good Fortune at one time and bad at another”. The moral is obvious: if a man wishes “always to enjoy good Fortune”, he must be wise enough to accommodate himself to the times”, p. 43. The point is also made by Pitkin in *Fortune*, p. 144.

⁷² Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 82.

⁷³ Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, p. 202. Also, one chapter in the Discourses is entitled, ‘That it behoves one to adapt Oneself to the Times if one wants to enjoy Continued Good Fortune.’ Machiavelli, *Discourses*, pp. 430-32.

⁷⁴ Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, p. 122.

⁷⁵ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 18. This was precisely the quality that Clausewitz recognised in Napoleon, in particular the way in which through great skill he harnessed and combined the political energies of the Revolution with pre-existing organisational and technological developments to achieve his dramatic victories.

two qualities in the general are needed above all: a 'lucid intellect' and a 'great moral courage,' reminiscent of Machiavelli's *prudenza* and *virtù*.⁷⁶

The attributes associated with *virtù* in Machiavelli's work are strikingly Clausewitzian: 'boldness, bravery, resolution, and decisiveness' combined with 'endurance and firmness, the necessary resilience, [and] the power of sustaining a course of action until the end is achieved.'⁷⁷ *Virtù* is associated with 'vital creative energy',⁷⁸ which closely resembles Clausewitz's notion of the 'creative spirit' presented in the trinity, but *virtù* for both thinkers is never simply the Romantic notion of 'unruly energy, unbridled ferocity, and rapidly exhausted boldness.'⁷⁹ Intellect and knowledge serve to direct and control the bold creative urge. Also, Pitkin explains that if Machiavelli 'confronts fortune with *virtù*, it is not to inure men against her blows but to ward off or control those blows through active contention.'⁸⁰ Whilst the personification of chance is not evident in Clausewitz,⁸¹ this idea of proactive and energetic exploitation, as opposed to passive mitigation, permeates *On War*. Machiavelli's personification usefully conveys the idea that fortune is something that can be confronted given sufficient activism and shrewd decisions: importantly, he emphasises the 'mutability of fortune under the impact of effort and ability.'⁸²

So, in both thinkers works fortune and chance are not simply reasons for despair, but nevertheless are powerful forces that cannot be ignored or avoided. As Paret notes of Clausewitz, 'to exclude or deny chance was to go against nature...Despite its constant power, chance was more than danger: it was a positive force to be exploited.'⁸³ Fortune rules mostly where men lack *virtù* or genius – attributes which in both thinkers works apply, albeit in different measures, to all actors involved in war, from statesmen to individual soldiers.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ Neal Wood, 'Introduction', in Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, p. xlv.

⁷⁷ Machiavelli, *The Art of War*, p. lv.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. lv.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. lv. Clausewitz notes how 'Inflammable emotions, feelings that are easily roused, are in general of little value in practical life' and that men ruled by such emotion find it 'hard to preserve their balance; they often lose their heads.' Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 123-24.

⁸⁰ Pitkin, *Fortune*, p. 144.

⁸¹ However, personification is not absent in *On War* – Clausewitz describes imagination as a 'frivolous goddess.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 128.

⁸² Pitkin, *Fortune*, p. 161.

⁸³ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 203.

⁸⁴ Machiavelli's *virtù* was not confined to the Prince or military commander, but was the human force or quality that enabled any human, in any situation, to face the whims of fortune.

The dominant Enlightenment outlook of a strict dichotomy between a realm of necessity and an unfathomable, untouchable realm of chance left little room for human creativity, hence the concomitant relative disregard for the attributes of great talent. As Coker notes, ‘Space, time, mass, force, and momentum, the terms of mechanics, took the place of...Machiavelli’s fortuna.’⁸⁵ In both Machiavelli and Clausewitz a more dynamic and dependent relationship exists, whereby the active human element is integral to shaping one’s own fate in the face of the unknown. The parallels suggest Clausewitz was heavily indebted to Machiavelli’s concept of *virtù* as the natural counterpart of fortune, which undoubtedly reflects Clausewitz’s close reading of Machiavelli’s works and an intellectual affinity with many of his ideas. The two thinkers closely correspond in their understanding of this subject, even if their ways of expressing it differed.

Clausewitz’s experiences

In Chapter 2 we noted how Clausewitz believed the best proofs in theory are personal and historical experience. Clausewitz’s diverse experience of war and his observations of contemporary events contributed greatly to the ideas contained in this tendency. Perhaps most crucially in this respect was the way in which experience emphasised to him the enormous distance that separated existing theories and his actual confrontation with actual warfare. Existing theory presented neat, precise, and sterile principles, but how could these be reconciled with the confused and messy reality he had experienced? What was the element in theory that kept it so divorced from war’s reality? Quite early in his studies Clausewitz recognised that the vital link was to be found in the uncertainty, unpredictability, and friction of war. Following the Wars of the First Coalition, whilst based at Neuruppin, his regiment was endlessly drilled in antiquated methods⁸⁶ and Clausewitz would later recall his disdain at the

Clausewitz equally emphasised the ‘virtues’ and ‘spirit’ that enabled ordinary soldiers to face the possibility of death in battle. Although genius would find its true place at the higher levels of war, it was by no means entirely absent at the lower levels.

⁸⁵ Coker, *Waging War*, p. 52.

⁸⁶ Paret describes life in the town: ‘Every weekday morning the men were drilled for four or five hours...The officers’ primary concerns were to achieve the utmost rapidity and precision in deploying their men from marching columns into various lines of battle...to change direction without losing cohesion, and to break off the line again into marching columns. The motions of loading, firing, and reloading were practiced...’ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 44.

‘formalistic, ceremonial character of these maneuvers’⁸⁷ when, as he stated, ‘even a modicum of reflection on these exercises...was bound to lead at once to the realization that none of this had taken place in the war that we had fought.’⁸⁸ The challenge, however, would be to explain such ‘missing’ factors in a theoretical manner, using clear concepts, and to reveal their interaction with other aspects of war.

Clausewitz concluded his lectures on ‘little war’ between October 1810 and June 1811 with the following modest statement to his students:

As little combat experience as I have, it is enough to give me an accurate view of the way most episodes in war unfold, as well as the numerous chance incidents, which touch everything, and of the numerous difficulties that inhibit accurate execution of the precise plans that theory tends to formulate. We might term these the friction of the whole machinery, which, as is the case with any other friction, can be recognised only through experience, and which so many authors ignore completely.⁸⁹

This paragraph contains ideas that would be developed in *On War* and are encapsulated in the trinity. It underlines the extent to which a proper understanding of these concepts can only be gained by first-hand experience of war and reveals how Clausewitz was struck by the omnipresence of chance events in the wars in which he had taken part; perhaps none more so than during the disastrous twin defeats at Jena-Auerstedt.

The Prussian campaign, as Clausewitz observed in his *Nachrichten*, was dogged by every kind of friction from divided command, indecision, insubordination, disorder, and confusion.⁹⁰ The defeat of 1806 was also partly caused by the failure of Prussian intelligence.⁹¹ Clausewitz’s dismissive views of intelligence may well derive from this experience and Napoleon’s skilful use of deception and operations security may have persuaded Clausewitz of the

⁸⁷ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 45.

⁸⁸ Carl von Clausewitz, ‘Observations on Prussia in Her Great Catastrophe’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 40.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 191.

⁹⁰ See Clausewitz, ‘Observations on Prussia’, pp. 32-84. See also Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), pp. 51-82.

⁹¹ Hugh Smith, *On Clausewitz* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 150.

difficulty of ever accurately determining the enemy's actions.⁹² It has been suggested that Clausewitz was somewhat ignorant of the importance that intelligence played in Napoleons campaigns.⁹³ Yet, Rosello notes that, 'Clausewitz's evaluation of intelligence may be interpreted as criticism of what he perceived to be the existing and dismal state of organisational and technical incapability to penetrate the fog of war, rather than a denial of the usefulness or general need for intelligence.'⁹⁴

Perhaps also Clausewitz was compelled to emphasise this tendency of war due to the extent to which the character of the wars of the Napoleonic era, in which he fought, were more suffused with chance and uncertainty than those of the eighteenth century and even those of the First Coalition, as 'rules and geometric calculation gave way to passion, massive friction and uncertainty.'⁹⁵ The French Revolution made possible mass conscription, which necessitated far-reaching changes in the organisation, supply, discipline, and training of the new armies, which in turn would greatly increase the 'tempo and range of operations' – the wars of this period would become 'more complex and less predictable' than before.⁹⁶

These personal experiences, combined with his detailed analyses of various campaigns revealed how often outcomes were decided by chance events, how the detailed plans of commanders rarely survived contact with the enemy, and how mistaken information and reports on the strengths or dispositions of the enemy often were. The fact that his insights were greatly derived from his own experiences have led some commentators to question the general relevance of his opinions, arguing that they may apply to Napoleonic warfare, but – particularly in the light of rapid technological change – no longer suffice to describe the nature of modern warfare. We will tackle such concerns later in the chapter.

⁹² Although the French suffered their own weaknesses on this score, particularly in relation to reconnaissance and communications and largely because Napoleon attempted to do too much. Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993), p. 88.

⁹³ Jay Luvaas is quoted in Rosello: 'In asserting that 'most intelligence is false,' Clausewitz reveals only that he was ignorant of this dimension of Napoleon's generalship.' Victor M. Rosello, 'Clausewitz's Contempt for Intelligence', *Parameters*, Spring 1991, pp. 105-08.

⁹⁴ Rosello, 'Clausewitz's Contempt', p. 108.

⁹⁵ Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 312.

⁹⁶ Paret, *Understanding War*, p. 78

Explorations

Now we have some idea of the various sources and influences on Clausewitz's thought with regard to the ideas contained in this trinity, we can move on to explore the subject in greater detail. To this end, we will consider some of the central concepts that relate to this tendency and then draw these ideas together later in the chapter to consider their implications in theory.

The various concepts of chance, uncertainty, probability, friction, the fog of war, and genius are all strongly related and interconnected. For instance, Herbig points to the inherent connection between chance and uncertainty: 'Something happens by chance, that is, an inexplicable or random event takes place whose cause is either inapparent or unconnected to its effects. This provokes uncertainty, the psychological state of discomfort from confusion and lack of information.'⁹⁷ Nevertheless, Clausewitz meant something very specific in his use of all these individual concepts; they do not simply represent synonyms for a single phenomenon, therefore it is important to explore the distinguishing features of each in some detail.⁹⁸ Equally, though not constituting a single phenomenon, the various concepts clearly constitute a coherent family of ideas connected by a common thread, which Clausewitz subsumed under the shorthand concept of 'chance and probability'. Modern interpreters often emphasise the integration of these concepts, employing generic terms such as 'general friction', which encompasses danger, exertion, uncertainty and chance.⁹⁹ Such generic approaches are welcome, but only if based on a solid grasp of the individual concepts that comprise them, and which can best be understood in isolation.

⁹⁷ Herbig, 'Chance and Uncertainty', p. 104.

⁹⁸ This is a task made more difficult by the fact that Clausewitz often discusses them in terms of their interactions, rather than as distinct ideas. Even where a separate chapter is devoted to friction, the play of chance is intimately implicated in the analysis, despite being analytically distinct ideas.

⁹⁹ See Barry D. Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction and Future War* (Washington: National Defense University, 1996).

The intruder: chance

The concept of chance employed by Clausewitz is intended in its pure form, conceived of as ‘arbitrary and incalculable’¹⁰⁰ events, or what we might commonly understand as ‘sheer random chance’¹⁰¹ characterised by an absence of cause, predictability, or regularity in the sequence of action and its antecedent conditions.¹⁰² Chance in war is the ‘intruder’ that ‘makes everything uncertain and interferes with the whole course of events’¹⁰³ – it renders war the ‘domain of the unexpected.’¹⁰⁴ As Strachan puts it, due to the play of chance, events have ‘a tendency to work against the grain of expectation.’¹⁰⁵ It is the play of chance that Clausewitz explains makes war a ‘relentless struggle with the unforeseen.’¹⁰⁶ One can perhaps understand the ‘cognitive dissonance’ displayed by both the Ancients and Enlightenment theorists given that chance represents the negation of the very order and uniformity they sought to reveal in their theories.¹⁰⁷ It is a feature of war recognised by commanders throughout history; so, for instance, early in the American War of Independence, after the failure to take Québec, General Washington remarked that, ‘hence I shall know the events of war are exceedingly doubtful, and that capricious fortune often blasts our most flattering hopes.’¹⁰⁸

Chance is something that can only be vaguely prepared for, because, as Seneca had it, ‘it is impossible to make preparations for what is undetermined.’¹⁰⁹ The very nature of something that happened by chance is that it was unforeseen – we did not expect it to happen. Therefore, we can prepare for chance only in the general sense of anticipating its probable existence, as

¹⁰⁰ Bassford, ‘The Primacy of Policy and the ‘Trinity’ in Clausewitz’s Mature Thought’, in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 89.

¹⁰¹ Christopher Bassford, ‘Policy, Politics, War, and Military Strategy’ Available at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/StrategyBook/WholeThing.html>>, retrieved 4 November 2007.

¹⁰² One must be careful to distinguish between this form of chance and other uses of the term (which Clausewitz himself employs) which relate more to the ‘chances’ of something happening; such usage pertains more to the notion of statistical probability, and which carries a somewhat different and distinct meaning. Manis and Meltzer, ‘Chance in Human Affairs’, p. 45.

¹⁰³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁵ Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz’s On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), p. 143.

¹⁰⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 117.

¹⁰⁷ Manis and Meltzer, ‘Chance in Human Affairs’, p. 46.

¹⁰⁸ Martin van Creveld, *Warfare in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Cassell, 1999), pp. 128-29.

¹⁰⁹ Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 64.

something we know will occur, but we are ignorant as to the precise form it will take.¹¹⁰ It was recognition of this fact that compelled the elder Moltke to claim that there was no point in devising detailed schemes beyond the deployment phase.¹¹¹ Clausewitz explains how war is ‘rich in unique episodes. Each is an uncharted sea, full of reefs. The commander may suspect the reefs’ existence without ever having seen them; now he has to steer past them in the dark.’¹¹² Chance events in this respect are those that cannot be mathematically predicted or are not ‘statistically tractable’.¹¹³ Thucydides had observed this about war centuries earlier when he remarked that ‘it is impossible to calculate accurately events that are determined by chance.’¹¹⁴ In war, because chance is ever-present and inescapable – Clausewitz argued this ‘element is never absent’ – it inevitably plays a large part in outcomes. Success or failure rarely accrues simply from the skill or incompetence of the commander, but is greatly determined by the play of chance, good luck, or misfortune. Although this is not something humans like to accept – Clausewitz describes the tendency to explain success as the result of genius alone as a ‘gratifying assumption’¹¹⁵ – that even ‘successful commanders leave to chance what cannot be controlled is the ultimate acknowledgement of chance’s centrality in the nature of war.’¹¹⁶

The unplanned battle for Nasirayah in late March during the 2003 Iraq War represents an excellent example of how even a technologically advanced force can be caught out by the classic sources of chance: the weather, unforgiving terrain, and the unexpected actions of the enemy. In late March *fedayeen* forces mounted an unforeseen resistance and, in scrambling to meet the threat, US forces took wrong turnings in the darkness and swirling dust and

¹¹⁰ Seneca believed that one of the best ways to resist fortune was preparation: ‘if one anticipates and plans for the attack of fortune, he can easily defend himself.’ Wood, ‘Seneca and Machiavelli’, p. 17. Likewise, Herodotus states: ‘Nothing is more valuable to a man than to lay his plans carefully and well; even if things go against him, and forces he cannot control bring his enterprise to nothing, he still has the satisfaction of knowing that he was defeated by chance.’ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 378.

¹¹¹ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 336. Moltke had been a student at the Berlin war School whilst Clausewitz was its director, but there is no evidence of the two ever meeting. We do however know that Moltke was a great admirer of Clausewitz, even if he misrepresented many of his ideas.

¹¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 139.

¹¹³ Beyerchen, ‘Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery’.

¹¹⁴ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 85.

¹¹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 195.

¹¹⁶ Herbig, ‘Chance and Uncertainty’, p. 109.

suffered serious casualties; rescue forces got bogged down in soft ground, took further wrong turnings, were divided and attacked by *fedayeen* after a vehicle was hit on a bridge crossing, and an American A-10 anti-tank aircraft mistakenly hit a number of friendly vehicles.¹¹⁷ Keegan sums up the battle as an ‘episode of military confusion at its worst.’¹¹⁸ Subsequently, the progress of the 1st Marines pushing north was seriously hampered by the onset of a massive dust storm, or *shamal*, which allowed Saddam’s troops to stage a blocking attack.¹¹⁹ As Keegan remarks with respect to this incident: ‘nothing in war is predictable.’¹²⁰ As it happened, dust storms would be a much more manageable chance occurrence than the unexpected reaction (at least to Pentagon defence planners)¹²¹ of thousands of Iraqis to the occupation in the months following the invasion. Countless such examples of the unexpected exist in the history of warfare and it would be pedantic to attempt an exhaustive list.¹²²

In addition to this largely unproblematic, standard conception of chance, Alan Beyerchen, drawing on the work of Poincaré, has identified two other principal forms of chance evident in Clausewitz’s work. Beyerchen refers to a form of chance deriving from ‘analytical blindness.’¹²³ This is perhaps best conceived as chance that results from human mental weakness, or as Poincaré put it, ‘our frailty and ignorance’ – an inability to comprehend the whole so that ‘we may happen to overlook circumstances which, at first sight, seemed completely foreign to the anticipated fact, to which we should never have dreamed of attributing any influence, which nevertheless, contrary to all anticipation, come to play an important part.’¹²⁴ When things do not proceed as expected due to causes that lay beyond our mental horizon, such occurrences appear as blind chance – as Carr had it, they are ‘the measure of our

¹¹⁷ John Keegan, *The Iraq War: The 21 Day Conflict and its Aftermath* (London: Pimlico, 2005), pp. 149-150.

¹¹⁸ Keegan, *The Iraq War*, p. 151.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹²¹ The now well-known State Department-led ‘Future of Iraq’ project had, despite some weaknesses, at least foreseen many of the types of problems that were to arise in post-war Iraq. Numerous other studies and commentators were also ignored by the Pentagon. For an lucid account of these issues see James Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad: America’s War in Iraq* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), in particular ‘Blind into Baghdad’, pp. 43-106.

¹²² One might simply consider, for instance, the fate of the Turkish troops sent to the Caucasus in 1914 when 20,000 were killed by the freezing cold weather alone, or the hundreds of galleys Rome lost due to storms during the First Punic War.

¹²³ Beyerchen, ‘Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery’

¹²⁴ Poincaré, *Science and Method*, p. 75.

ignorance.’¹²⁵ This, Clausewitz recognised, was even a significant problem when analysing wars in retrospect, because the multiplicity of causes can ‘lead to a broad and complex field of inquiry in which we may easily get lost.’¹²⁶ This myopia might also derive from a form of ‘cognitive dissonance’ or ‘intolerance of ambiguity’, as noted earlier: the often unconscious way in which humans deal with developments that appear discrepant or do not fit with preconceived ideas, but that often lead to self-delusion and misperception.¹²⁷

A large part of the experience of chance may in fact turn out to be a function of this fundamental human weakness. No human mind is capable of comprehending simultaneously the complex whole, its interactions, and the infinite relations between cause and effect. Indeed, as Poincaré remarks, ‘If a being with such a mind existed, we could play no game of chance with him, we should always lose.’¹²⁸ With hindsight we may be able to better understand the circumstances that led to certain events, but the point remains that, for those involved at the time, whether due to sheer incompetence or analytical blindness, events were not foreseen and they therefore still warrant inclusion as chance factors in war. We must be mindful, as Clausewitz counselled, not to project our knowledge of what we know happened, back on to those who had to make decisions at the time.¹²⁹

This understanding of chance helps to explain events which otherwise appear to occupy a form of ‘grey area’ of events – the ‘seemingly probable’ – which we might describe as chance happenings, but which some might argue do not really deserve the name. Here we have in mind those events that appear determined by conditions to an extent that their occurrence should perhaps have been foreseen, but were not. To take the above example of the sandstorm that hit US troops in Iraq, one might argue that sandstorms are a regular occurrence in the central Mesopotamian plain and thus should not have caught American forces off-guard. Yet, even with the most advanced meteorological technology, it would have been impossible to predict that the sandstorm would hit precisely

¹²⁵ Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 102.

¹²⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 185.

¹²⁷ See Booth, *Strategy*, p. 25.

¹²⁸ Poincaré, *Science and Method*, p. 65.

¹²⁹ On this point Clausewitz states that ‘we can understand why later critics who know all the previous and attendant circumstances must not be influenced by their knowledge when they ask which among the unknown facts they themselves would have considered probable at the time of the action.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 193.

when and where it did – that was largely a matter of chance. Even the best preparations for possible, even probable yet unpredictable events, does not negate their nature as essentially unknowable (perhaps comparable to Donald Rumsfeld’s infamous ‘known unknowns’),¹³⁰ it just permits a more anticipatory approach.

Another form of chance Beyerchen draws attention to concerns the concept of ‘micro-cause’ or which the historian might know as the problem of ‘Cleopatra’s nose.’¹³¹ Micro-cause refers to situations in which disproportionately large effects result from apparently trifling initial causes. As Poincaré put it, ‘a very small cause which escapes our notice determines a considerable effect that we cannot fail to see, and then we say that that effect is due to chance.’¹³² Even if we have a fairly sound understanding of the workings of a system, as, for instance, meteorologists have of climatic conditions, precisely predicting or judging the course of the weather in any particular circumstance is incredibly difficult because the tiniest variations of climatic conditions, which can entirely escape our observation, determine whether a ‘cyclone will burst here or there.’¹³³ Clausewitz draws attention to this problem in relation to his discussion of the critical analysis of past campaigns (itself dependent on linking effects to appreciable causes); the process is made difficult by the fact that ‘in war, as in life generally, all parts of the whole are interconnected and thus the effects produced, however small their cause, must influence all subsequent military operations and modify their final outcome to some degree.’¹³⁴ Furthermore, if such causes ‘happen to be transitory or

¹³⁰ The full quote was: ‘Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don’t know we don’t know.’ GlobalSecurity.org, ‘Transcript: Defence Department Briefing’, 12 February 2002. Available online at: <<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2002/02/mil-020212-usia01.htm>>, retrieved 7 February 2008.

¹³¹ This is an idea adopted by Carr in his lectures on history, and borrowed from the title of one of J. B. Bury’s articles with the same title. The thesis has it that it was the beauty of Cleopatra’s nose that determined the outcome of the decisive Battle of Actium because of Antony’s infatuation. Carr explains why, although this may appear as pure accident, ‘the connexion between female beauty and male infatuation is one of the most regular sequences of cause and effect observable in everyday life.’ See Carr, *What is History?*, pp. 87-108. Howard also touches on this problem: ‘Are we not hearing constantly fresh evidence about Napoleon’s medical condition which explains his behaviour at Waterloo?’ Howard, *Causes*, p. 192.

¹³² Poincaré, *Science and Method*, pp. 67-68.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹³⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 185.

accidental, history may not have recorded them at all.’¹³⁵ The great gap between infinitely small and ‘inappreciable’ causes and such potentially enormous and inescapable effects means we have to leave to chance that which we could not hope to explain. This is not so much a function of human analytical weakness as the objective fact of the incredible complexity of certain cause and effect relationships – Clausewitz emphasises the ‘vast, almost infinite distance there can be between cause and effect.’¹³⁶ This is particularly relevant to war given its huge complexity, the sheer amount of variables, and the openness of the phenomenon to outside factors.

To subscribe to the pervasive existence of chance in war is not to argue that ‘everything is possible in human affairs’¹³⁷ or that ‘existence...has neither cause nor reason nor necessity.’¹³⁸ Emphasis on chance is not to deny that things are causally determined – as Carr notes, accident is not an absence of causal determination.¹³⁹ Einstein was adamant that ‘God does not play dice with the universe!’ Conversely, nor is to stress the universality of cause to adhere to a narrow or restrictive determinism.¹⁴⁰ The point here is that causes in war are sometimes so incredibly small as to escape our notice and appear detached from observable effects or appear so unexpectedly from beyond our conceptual radar that they appear as chance. Put differently, we can maintain that every chance event does ultimately have causes, they were just causes we failed to see, understand, or predict. They are nevertheless rightly considered objective, or irreducibly ontological, as far as they are both a consequence of the universal human condition and the incredible randomness of aspects of reality.

A final point to note with respect to chance is to be wary of generals who retrospectively explain their own failure in war by an appeal to chance. Just as Carr describes how, ‘In a group or a nation which is riding in the trough, not on the crest, of historical events, theories that stress the role of chance or accident in

¹³⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 182.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 698.

¹³⁷ Karl Popper quoted in Carr, *What is History?*, p. 93.

¹³⁸ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 100. One philosopher posed the question thus: ‘If everything that happens can in principle be explained [causally], is there then no such thing in the universe as random chance, genuine contingency, and uncertainty?’ Feinberg quoted in Manis and Meltzer, ‘Chance in Human Affairs’, p. 46.

¹³⁹ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 99.

¹⁴⁰ Even in modern quantum physics, let alone the social sciences, some theorists point to a seemingly fundamental indeterminism in nature.

history will be found to prevail',¹⁴¹ so defeated generals will be looking to explain away their shortcomings by claiming the Goddess of Fortune was against them,¹⁴² when in success that same general would no doubt emphasise his complete control of the situation throughout. Chance works both ways. It can contribute to both success and failure, but rarely is it the sole determinant of either: both talent and incompetence figure greatly. One might suspect an underlying ineptitude in those who claim all is decided by chance, and a measure of undeserved self-assurance in those who deny its existence. Tellingly, in what was perhaps a rare instance of modesty, Napoleon was apparently quoted as saying 'Engage the enemy, and see what happens.'¹⁴³ For one of the greatest commanders in history to pay heed to chance and luck in this manner is a remarkable instance of perhaps unexpected candour.

*The 'shadows of uncertainty'*¹⁴⁴

Clausewitz remarked that 'war is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser intensity.'¹⁴⁵ So, how are we to distinguish this concept from that of chance? We have already noted the interrelation of these concepts in the sense that a psychological state of uncertainty is often a consequence of the play of chance events. Yet, as Herbig notes, 'one may feel uncertain for many reasons other than chance, and chance does not always lead to uncertainty.'¹⁴⁶ To grasp the full meaning of this term, we need to take a wider perspective than purely the affect of chance.

¹⁴¹ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 101.

¹⁴² So Hitler denied his own responsibility for failure as he dictated to his secretary Martin Borman in the Spring of 1945. As Overy notes, to Hitler, 'Germany was a plaything for fate, doomed by the forces of world history.' Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p. 315.

¹⁴³ Quoted in Herbig, 'Chance and Uncertainty', p. 108. Napoleon also stated that 'I have never really been my own master; I have always been governed by circumstances.' Quoted in Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *Principles*, p. 64.

¹⁴⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 117.

¹⁴⁶ Herbig, 'Chance and Uncertainty', p. 104. A chance event that works in one's favour may even strengthen one's resolve, clarify something that was formerly shrouded, or make possible an action previously discounted. Chance is an ambiguous concept that can work as much in one's favour as against.

The concept of uncertainty essentially refers to the human reaction to that which cannot be fully known or controlled and it concerns the subjective psychological condition of those involved in war.¹⁴⁷ As such, uncertainty becomes evident as integral to the nature of war as soon as we consider the human forces that are central to it. To ensure that theory does not lose touch with reality, Clausewitz stresses that it ‘must also take the human factor into account...The art of war deals with living and moral forces. Consequently, it cannot attain the absolute, or certainty; it must always leave a margin for uncertainty.’¹⁴⁸ War is not only about material factors that can be counted or calculated, but is suffused with psychological factors, which are deemed not only important in addition to, but as inseparable from, physical factors: unlike an alloy, they cannot be separated by chemical processes.¹⁴⁹

All decisions in war must be taken with regard to the consequences of action in this moral realm; whether this relates to one’s own forces, government, and wider society,¹⁵⁰ or those of the enemy and neutral actors. As Clausewitz states, it would be platitudinous to list all such moral phenomena because most are commonly known.¹⁵¹ A few examples provide an indication of the kind of issues concerned here: the enemy’s intentions and strength of will, the character of commanders, morale, and so on. It is because these factors are inherently intangible, incalculable, and unpredictable – ‘they cannot be classified or counted’¹⁵² – that attaining certainty as to their precise character or ultimate effect is necessarily limited, regardless of the quantity or quality of information one might have. Clausewitz explains how similar actions against different people, or even against the same people at a different time, can produce entirely different effects. The precise impact of the use of force upon humans is almost impossible to predict.¹⁵³ He notes how, for the commander, ‘Thousands of

¹⁴⁷ As such, uncertainty usually manifests itself in the asking of questions. In simple terms, such questions might include: where is the enemy, what are its plans/intentions, when will it strike, what are its objectives, where are my forces, what will I do next, what will be the effect of this action, and so forth.

¹⁴⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 97.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁵³ For instance, Guevara relates an incident where a treacherous rebel, Eutimio Guerra, found himself sleeping next to Fidel Castro one night, with the ability to murder him at will. Guevara notes how, ‘That whole night, the fate of the Cuban Revolution depended, in large measure, on

wrong turns running in all directions tempt his perceptions; and if the range, confusion and complexity of the issues are not enough to overwhelm him the dangers and responsibilities are.’¹⁵⁴

Also, the extent to which uncertainty and confusion is normative in war is revealed by the incredible ‘prevalence and potency of the factor of surprise.’¹⁵⁵ The enemy will be constantly trying to achieve the unexpected arrival of their forces – whether at the strategic, operational, or tactical levels – where not expected through the use of deception,¹⁵⁶ secrecy, speed, and cunning.¹⁵⁷ What Clausewitz describes as the ‘universal urge to surprise’¹⁵⁸ can have a serious paralysing psychological effect on morale and ‘loosen the bonds of cohesion’¹⁵⁹ within the force, which makes it one of history’s great ‘force multipliers’.¹⁶⁰ Importantly, surprise, as Clausewitz emphasises, is often dependent on chance, coincidence, and the mistakes or misperceptions of the opponent.¹⁶¹ Surprise, therefore, has its roots in the weakness of human perception and stems from basic uncertainties.

So, in gauging and evaluating such uncertainties and intangibles, Clausewitz extolled the virtues of intuition, the ‘inward eye’,¹⁶² and ‘discreet

the twists and turns of a man’s mind, on a balance of courage and fear, and, perhaps, on conscience, on a traitor’s lust for power and wealth.’ Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, *Reminiscences of the Cuban Revolutionary War* (London: Harper Perennial, 2009), p. 35.

¹⁵⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 693.

¹⁵⁵ Colin S. Gray, ‘How Has War Changed Since the End of the Cold War?’, *Parameters*, Spring, 2005, p. 15.

¹⁵⁶ Deception operations may involve feints, diversions, illusions, political subversion, disinformation, planting ‘black intelligence’, feigning strength or weakness, counter-deception (i.e. pretending one has fallen for a deception, but instead preparing to exploit it), feeding false information through spies and other forms of communication. Successful deception operations are highly reliant on good intelligence, adaptability, and usually involve reinforcing the opponent’s existing beliefs and assumptions (in turn dependent on accurate intelligence).

¹⁵⁷ Clausewitz notes that ‘surprise action is rooted in at least some degree of cunning.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 238.

¹⁵⁸ Clausewitz generally held that surprise was most attractive to the weaker group where boldness and cunning can combine to convert weakness into strength. He was sceptical about achieving surprise at a strategic level because of the large space and time involved (‘the strategist’s chessmen do not have the kind of mobility that is essential for stratagem and cunning’), and the costs in time and effort required. *Ibid.*, p. 239. Michael Handel has suggested Clausewitz’s views in this regard are outdated given improvements in mobility, firepower, and communications enabling rapid concentration of forces over large distances. This, he believes, lies behind the instances of strategic surprise witnessed during the twentieth century. Handel, *Masters*, p. 230.

¹⁵⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 237

¹⁶⁰ Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 216.

¹⁶¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 235-36.

¹⁶² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 118.

judgement.’¹⁶³ For instance, when discussing decisions regarding the levels of effort to be made and the amount of force to be employed, he states that such intangibles ‘introduce uncertainties that make it difficult to gauge the amount of resistance to be faced and, in consequence, the means required and the objectives to be set.’¹⁶⁴ So, the best we can do is to,

examine our own political aim and that of the enemy...*gauge* the strength and situation of the opposing state...*gauge* the character and abilities of its government and people and do the same in regard to our own. Finally, we must *evaluate* the political sympathies of other states and the effect that war may have on them.¹⁶⁵

The stress on judgement over calculation is a direct consequence of uncertainty deriving from the inescapable presence of intangibles. This point is crucial and easily overlooked. Even for militaries equipped with the most advanced intelligence gathering technology, definitively determining potential effects and reactions in the sphere of the mind and spirit will remain a unattainable chimera.¹⁶⁶ As David Kahn notes, ‘not even the most energetic intelligence operation can penetrate an enemy’s brain.’¹⁶⁷ Moreover, even the enemy might not fully ‘know itself the limits of its ambitions.’¹⁶⁸

Lack of proper understanding in this realm of moral factors is often exacerbated by distorting forms of ethnocentrism and strategic-cultural myopia, which distort accurate assessments of one’s enemies’ (and even oneself or one’s allies’) intentions and capabilities, or of the political environment in which one is conducting operations. As Booth argues, this ‘lack of empathy has meant an absence of intimate understanding of the feelings, thoughts and motives of others: this has prevented an accurate forecasting of likely responses.’¹⁶⁹ Clausewitz was well aware of the way such perspectives distort evaluations,

¹⁶³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 693.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 707.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 708.

¹⁶⁶ On this note, Keegan mentions Henry Stimson, a former American Secretary of State, who ‘warned of the difference between reading a man’s mail and reading his mind.’ John Keegan, *Intelligence in War* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 4.

¹⁶⁷ David Kahn, ‘Clausewitz and Intelligence’, in Handel, *Modern Strategy*, p. 119.

¹⁶⁸ Booth, *Strategy*, p. 123.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40. This is mirrored in military history, and history in general for that matter, and manifests itself as the problem of appreciating ‘the general otherness of earlier ages’ along with the fact that the historian always starts ‘with certain preconceived ideas...He imposes his own order on the facts before him.’ Howard, *Causes*, p. 192.

which are not only a problem of obtaining objective knowledge, but also crucially dependent on the ‘qualities of mind and character of the men making the decision’¹⁷⁰ – this insight is applicable to any war-making group, from a Jihadist terrorist cell to a modern state military. All actors approach and make sense of the world through unique cultural perspectives. They observe, orientate themselves, and act based on assumptions, prejudices, and even illusions about the nature of the world.¹⁷¹ It is also easily forgotten that all information (even if derived from the most advanced sources) only attains meaning once it is digested by human agents and subsequently used as the basis for decisions – decisions that will inevitably be shaped by the unique outlook and desires of the actor in question.¹⁷² The consequences arising from ethnocentric perspectives can be serious, exacerbate uncertainty in war, and be highly detrimental to operations: for instance, a failure to understand enemy intentions can increase the likelihood of political, strategic, or tactical surprise.¹⁷³ Also, cultural taboos may distort clear thinking, so the Western nuclear taboo (non-utility as orthodoxy), for instance, might cloud the fact that others may see atomic weapons as potentially useful.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 708.

¹⁷¹ An issue touched on in the discussion of ‘strategic culture’ in Chapter 3.

¹⁷² Perhaps the exception to this idea would be a form of ‘doomsday machine’ – as was reputed to have been built by the Soviets in the 1970-80s and as popularised in the film *Dr Strangelove* – that would automatically detonate nuclear devices on sensing an attack, without the decision being filtered through any human strategic-cultural medium. If it did indeed exist, the supposed purpose of the ‘Dead Hand’ or *Perimetr* system was to deter a first strike by the US against Soviet command and control because the result would be the automatic detonation of cobalt-jacketed hydrogen bombs buried in various places around the globe causing a world-wide catastrophe. However, even such a machine had to be conceived, built, and operationalised (and supposedly turned on in the event of a crisis) by people with unique perspectives and motives. Moreover, the effectiveness of the system – as the ultimate deterrent – would be dependent on American assessments as to the credibility of reports that the Soviet Union had actually built such a machine or seriously considered using it, which in themselves would amount to deductions based on uncertain evaluations of the enemy, distorted by subjective assumptions: would the Soviet Union risk national suicide to prevent an American first strike? The point here is that there is no final escape from this blinkering subjectivity which makes assessments regarding the plans and likely moves of the enemy extremely difficult to judge. See Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 311.

¹⁷³ Booth, *Strategy*, pp. 104-05. Consider, for example, Japan’s misperception of America’s reaction to the attack on Pearl Harbour.

¹⁷⁴ Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), p. 288. See also Colin S. Gray, ‘Clausewitz rules, OK? The future is the past – with GPS’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, 1999, pp. 180-81. He notes that the ‘danger in tabooist reasoning amongst Western academics is that they risk convincing themselves of that which is not true. We are encouraged to repose confidence in a rather fuzzy culturalist belief that, for example, nuclear weapons have not been, and cannot be, used because of the operation of the nuclear taboo. A plausible consequence of such a position is blindness to the attraction of WMD to those for whom necessity knows no taboo.’

Cultural analysis has become a major concern for modern Western strategists facing, in al-Qaeda, an Islamic terrorist foe whose ideology, strategic outlook, and tactics are so divergent from mainstream Western experiences.¹⁷⁵ Also, faced with complex insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military has even recruited social scientists and anthropologists to work alongside combat units in the form of ‘Human Terrain Teams’, tasked with mapping social dynamics and local political allegiances – ‘the human element’¹⁷⁶ – based on rigorous research methodologies not commonly found in military institutions.¹⁷⁷ Such innovative measures may help to mitigate some misunderstandings and contribute to ‘situational awareness’, but the historical record suggests cause for considerable scepticism, particularly if such efforts are not supported by a wider effective counterinsurgency strategy.

Information, intelligence, and the ‘fog of war’

Regardless of the difficulties of mitigating uncertainty associated with moral forces, the information upon which assessments are made in war is, for Clausewitz, ineluctably deficient. Clausewitz is well known for his emphasis on the interminable poverty of reliable information in war and his dismissive attitude regarding the substance and value of intelligence. In a notably evocative passage Clausewitz states that,

the general unreliability of all information presents a special problem in war: all action takes place, so to speak, in a kind of twilight, which, like fog or moonlight, often seems to make things seem grotesque and larger than they really are. Whatever is hidden from full view in this feeble light has to be guessed at by talent, or simply left to chance.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁵ This imperative is revealed in the title of Mary Halbeck’s book *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

¹⁷⁶ Robert H. Scales, ‘Culture-Centric Warfare’, *Proceedings*, October 2004. Available online at: <http://www.military.com/Content/MoreContent1?file=NI_1004_Culture-P1>, retrieved 6 February 2008.

¹⁷⁷ See for instance: Robert Young Pelton, ‘Afghanistan: the New War for Hearts and Minds’, *The Men’s Journal*, 21 January 2009; Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson, ‘An Organizational Solution for DOD’s Cultural Knowledge Needs’, *Military Review*, July-August 2005; and Montgomery McFate, ‘Anthropology and Counterinsurgency: The Strange Story of their Curious Relationship’, *Military Review*, March-April 2005.

¹⁷⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 161.

The general idea of the inadequacy of information in war is expressed in many other parts of his work.¹⁷⁹ Clausewitz states that, 'If we consider the actual basis of this information, how unreliable and transient it is, we soon realise that war is a flimsy structure that can easily collapse and bury us in ruins.'¹⁸⁰ The 'nature of war certainly does not let us see at all times where we are going'¹⁸¹ because 'all information and assumptions are open to doubt, and with chance at work everywhere, the commander continually finds that things are not as expected.'¹⁸² At best, and even this may be doubted, Clausewitz notes, that the 'only situation a commander can know is his own; his opponent's he can know only from unreliable intelligence.'¹⁸³ Moreover, it is likely that the enemy will be doing his level best to deny us knowledge of its intentions, or even actively attempting to deceive, fool, and surprise us.

Also, intelligence is often false and inaccurate because fear causes people to exaggerate bad news.¹⁸⁴ The wide applicability of this insight is revealed in the work of the revolutionary guerrilla leader Ernesto 'Che' Guevara who noted that 'the harm that can result from exaggerated information which misjudges the danger is very great. It is not probable that danger will be underrated...The same magic mentality that makes phantasms and various supernatural beings appear also creates monstrous armies where there is hardly a platoon or an enemy patrol.'¹⁸⁵ Ken Booth has remarked that, 'Worst-case forecasting is to strategic analysis what the 'god of the gaps' is to theology: it fills in for what we do not understand.'¹⁸⁶ In conditions of danger, where survival may be in

¹⁷⁹ The basic ideas Clausewitz develops in *On War* are already to be found in a rudimentary form in *The Principles of War*, written in 1812. Carl von Clausewitz, *The Principles of War*, trans. and ed. Hans W. Gatzke (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), pp. 62-69.

¹⁸⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 136.

¹⁸¹ Clausewitz, *Principles*, p. 63.

¹⁸² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 117.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 95. In Chapter 16, Book 3 on Strategy Clausewitz states that, 'We hardly know accurately our own situation at any particular moment, while the enemy's, which is concealed from us, must be deduced from very little evidence.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 255.

¹⁸⁴ Such as overblown estimates of enemy troop strength. *Ibid.*, p. 136. This idea is also found in his *Principles*: 'Not only are we uncertain about the strength of the enemy, but in addition rumor (i.e., all the news which we obtain from outposts, through spies, or by accident) exaggerates his size. The majority of people are timid by nature, and that is why the constantly exaggerate danger'. Clausewitz, *Principles*, p. 62. Note that it appears that here Clausewitz is almost dismissing what we today term intelligence as mere rumour – evidence if it is needed of his disdain for such information, but given his more balanced views later in his life, suggests he may have been persuaded of its importance by the time he came to write *On War*.

¹⁸⁵ Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (London: Souvenir Press, 2003), p. 75.

¹⁸⁶ This is also suggested in the mind-set which holds that 'over-insurance is not a sin, but taking unavoidable risk is.' Booth, *Strategy*, pp. 122 and 123.

jeopardy, there may be a proclivity for ‘the possible to become thought of as the probable.’¹⁸⁷

So, fear, intermixed with chance,¹⁸⁸ numerous imponderables, the limitations of accurate observation, the fact that some things will always remain secret, and the vast amount of factors involved in war, before which ‘Newton himself would quail’,¹⁸⁹ are provided as some of the chief reasons for Clausewitz’s scepticism with regard to the reliability of information.¹⁹⁰ Together, these factors create what Clausewitz memorably termed the ‘fog of war.’ However, as Kahn rightly points out, despite this intense scepticism regarding information and intelligence – which incidentally he shared with Jomini¹⁹¹ – Clausewitz does not ‘dogmatically maintain that it can never serve.’¹⁹² Clausewitz takes it for granted that more and better information will be sought after. The potential value of intelligence would be largely dependent on the commanders ability to effectively exploit what limited knowledge was made available, but perhaps more importantly, to be able to withstand the endless torrent of false or contradictory reports.¹⁹³ Nevertheless, the central point for Clausewitz is that a superlative degree of accurate information is both an objective impossibility and a dangerously deceptive fantasy.¹⁹⁴

Of course, since Clausewitz wrote, intelligence and information gathering techniques have been enhanced by enormous strides in technology and institutional specialisation. Both the potential quality and quantity of available information available to politicians, commanders, and troops is vastly superior to

¹⁸⁷ Booth, *Strategy*, p. 126.

¹⁸⁸ Chance events may render previously useful pieces of information void by the unpredictable progression of events – what was true one minute ago, may no longer apply.

¹⁸⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 708.

¹⁹⁰ See Kahn, ‘Intelligence’, pp. 118-21.

¹⁹¹ Jomini stated that gaining information, whilst important, ‘is a thing of the utmost importance, not to say impossibility.’ Jomini, *Art of War*, p. 215. The difference in their presentation of the problem is that Jomini then goes on to offer prescriptive advice on how to obtain better intelligence, whilst Clausewitz leaves the subject largely untouched beyond observations of its inadequacy.

¹⁹² Kahn, ‘Intelligence’, p. 117. Echevarria also notes that Clausewitz ‘did not deny the importance of information.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 106. Handel notes that ‘Clausewitz’s frequent pessimistic comments regarding the value of intelligence should not be understood as a blanket dismissal of all intelligence collected in wartime.’ Handel, *Masters*, p. 228.

¹⁹³ ‘The dangers that are reported may soon, like waves, subside; but like waves they keep recurring, without apparent reason. The commander must trust his judgement and stand like a rock on which the waves break in vain.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 136.

¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, intelligence itself is rarely a guarantor of success on its own, as Keegan states: ‘military and political survival does not depend solely on good intelligence.’ Keegan, *Intelligence*, p. 11.

that available in Clausewitz's day.¹⁹⁵ Some of the most high profile developments would perhaps include the development of large staff bureaucracies and dedicated, permanent, and professional military and civilian intelligence bodies;¹⁹⁶ the signal's intelligence ('sigint') of wireless and radio technology developed extensively during the First World War,¹⁹⁷ along with the use of aerial reconnaissance photography used extensively on the Western Front; and the more advanced cryptographical techniques associated primarily with World War Two.¹⁹⁸ In more recent years, intelligence gathering techniques have become enormously sophisticated and technologically advanced.

Yet, as argued, by a number of specialist scholars, regardless of technological advances, failures of intelligence are inevitable. As soon as one explores the actual processes and organisational dynamics of the acquisition, analysis, and appreciation of intelligence, the potential for failure is overwhelming. The sources of this 'inevitability of failure' – particularly at strategic levels – have been masterfully studied by Richard Betts, Robert Jervis, and Michael Handel.¹⁹⁹ They point to such factors as basic human psychology, ingrained preconceptions, the nature of the relationships between consumers and

¹⁹⁵ Which was principally dependent on direct observation, spies and interceptions of communications, advanced detachments, and inferences drawn from past behaviour. Rosello argues that 'Clausewitz never witnessed the production of true intelligence.' Rosello, 'Clausewitz's Contempt', p. 112.

¹⁹⁶ Civilian intelligence agencies often started life as, or at least had strong connections with, military organisations. For instance, the British Secret Intelligence Service, more commonly known as MI6 (Military Intelligence 6), was the War Office liaison section attached to its headquarters during and after the Second World War. It only truly became a 'coherent and well ordered' organisation during the War. Richard Aldrich quoted in Stephen Dorril, *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 19.

¹⁹⁷ For instance, the British were in possession of all of the German naval codes, and intercepts were analysed in Room 40 of the Admiralty Old Building. However, its failure to fully exploit this advantage highlights the difficulty of turning knowledge into effective action. Strachan notes how the Royal Navy found it very difficult to effectively integrate intelligence with operations without compromising long-term security. Commanders were fed with incomplete and progressively obsolete information. The Battles of Dogger Bank in 1915 and Jutland in 1916 are good examples of this. Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), pp. 198-207. On land, the German successes at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes were very much a product of signals intercepts. Also, the famously intercepted 'Zimmerman telegram' may have been a major factor compelling America to enter the War. Keegan, *Intelligence*, pp. 167 and 172.

¹⁹⁸ The most famous examples being of course the ULTRA intelligence obtained from German messages encrypted on the Enigma machine by Allied cryptologists based at Bletchley Park. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-85.

¹⁹⁹ Richard K. Betts, 'Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures Are Inevitable', *World Politics*, Vol. 31, No. 1, October 1978, pp. 61-89; Robert Jervis, 'Hypotheses on Misperception', *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 3, April 1968, pp. 454-479; and Michael Handel, *War, Strategy and Intelligence* (London: Routledge, 1989), chapters 4 and 5, pp. 187-281.

producers of intelligence, differences of opinion amongst analysts and decision-makers, but perhaps most importantly, the ‘wishful thinking, cavalier disregard of professional analysts, and...the premises and preconceptions of policy makers.’²⁰⁰ Also, one only has to begin to factor in the enemy’s almost certain efforts in the realm of counter-intelligence, misinformation, deception, and so on – none of which can be definitively negated – and scepticism creeps back in. Also, Knox notes that ‘intelligence collection devices obey the same dialectical law as weaponry. Counteraction or evasion or deception may at any point surprise even – or especially – those made slothful by seemingly effortless technological superiority.’²⁰¹ Whilst perhaps Clausewitz was too stridently dismissive of intelligence given the limited nature of the art in his time, it would be just as mistaken to be overly impressed by the claims of those ‘information warriors’ who stalk the corridors of modern military organisations. As Keegan states, ‘there is no such thing as the golden secret, the piece of ‘pure intelligence’, which will resolve all.’²⁰² Recent high-profile Western intelligence failures – in relation to the 9/11 attacks and Iraq’s putative WMD arsenal – only adds credence to these insights.

Furthermore, in situations of insurgency the type of intelligence required may be of a very different quality to that required in conventional military operations, and not entirely susceptible to technical fixes; an observation borne out by recent American experiences in Iraq.²⁰³ Rather, there is often a strong need for deep socio-cultural and political understanding; the demands on natural intellect, judgement, and perception may be extremely high. Also, it may be the case that ‘the organisation of the standard military intelligence system, developed for major theatre warfare rather than counterinsurgency compounds

²⁰⁰ Betts, ‘Analysis’, p. 67.

²⁰¹ Knox, ‘Conclusion: Continuity and revolution in the making of strategy’, in Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (eds.), *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 642.

²⁰² Keegan, *Intelligence*, p. 4.

²⁰³ Robert Scales notes that, ‘Once the kinetic phase of the fighting in Iraq ended, soldiers and Marines found themselves immersed in an alien culture unable to differentiate friend from foe or to identify those within the population they could trust to provide useful and timely tactical intelligence. The military relied on intelligence-gathering tools and methods left over from the Cold War. A technical intelligence specialist sitting in Maryland could exploit data collected from overhead sensors to count vehicles, spot convoy movement, or report on the level of telephone traffic halfway around the globe. But in spite of good intentions, he could not begin to divine how the enemy intended to fight. Today, the enemy’s motives often remain a mystery, and the cost in casualties of this inability to understand the enemy and predict his actions has been too great.’ Scales, ‘Culture-Centric Warfare’.

the difficulty' of evaluating the insurgency.²⁰⁴ Analysis of intelligence is particularly demanding in insurgency, where 'analysts must understand a complex web spun from society and conflict, perceptions and culture, hundreds and even thousands of personalities, and relationships between and among key personalities.'²⁰⁵

Lifting the fog – Clausewitz and the Revolution in Military Affairs

In recent decades a so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has been proclaimed. Its more extreme proponents believe, it 'will famously be able to lift the 'fog of war' and remove Clausewitzian friction and uncertainty from war.'²⁰⁶ This idea is centred around the impact of new technologies and is principally associated with developments in America.²⁰⁷ Important aspects of the RMA emerged during the second half of the twentieth century, especially in the 1970s, however, the idea seriously took hold in the 1990s.²⁰⁸ The material components of the RMA can be divided into a number of areas or 'systems': sensors, such as satellites, UAVs,²⁰⁹ and Special Forces; communications, such as computers, command centres, and the internet; and advanced weapons and munitions, such as smart bombs, precision guidance, and cruise missiles - the 'paradigmatic weapon of the RMA.'²¹⁰ However, it is the complete integration of these technologies – the 'system of systems' – that represents what is

²⁰⁴ Kyle Teamey and Jonathan Sweet, 'Organising Intelligence for Counterinsurgency', *Military Review*, September-October 2006, p. 24. This point has also been made by Brian A. Jackson who states that 'the vagaries of COIN make collecting, analysing, and applying intelligence quite different from traditional military intelligence operations, which are optimised for rapid, decisive action.' Brian A. Jackson, 'Counterinsurgency Intelligence in a 'Long War': The British Experience in Northern Ireland', *Military Review*, January-February 2007, p. 84.

²⁰⁵ Teamey and Sweet, 'Organising Intelligence', p. 27.

²⁰⁶ Jan Angstrom, 'Introduction: Debating the nature of modern war', in Isabelle Duyvesteyn, Isabelle and Jan Angstrom (eds.), *Rethinking the Nature of War* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 15.

²⁰⁷ Although some of the ideas associated with the debate first emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1970s.

²⁰⁸ This was partly due to the rapid and cumulative improvements in technical capabilities and know-how. However, being that many of the vital systems already existed, the crucial factor was most likely political and associated with the opening up of opportunities generated by the end of the Cold War. Additional impetus was provided by the Gulf War of 1991 during which many of the new systems were first put through their paces in actual operations, the results of which were impressive if not deceptively flattering. Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 379 (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 13.

²⁰⁹ Unmanned Aerial Vehicles.

²¹⁰ Lawrence Freedman, *The Revolution in Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper 318 (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 70.

specifically novel. The associated doctrine of Network Centric Warfare (NCW)²¹¹ focuses on the prospect of achieving ‘dominant battlespace knowledge’ through comprehensive systems integration in so-called ‘information wars.’²¹² It holds out the potential for the seamless collection, assessment, and communication of information, allowing force to be applied through advanced weapons systems with greater range, lethality, and accuracy.²¹³ All this contributes to enhanced situational awareness, improved mission effectiveness – encapsulated in the concept of ‘Full Spectrum Dominance’²¹⁴ – and less requirement for large force packages in theatre.

Yet, despite the objective fact of these far-reaching developments, many commentators have emphasised the limitations of these claims. Indeed, many of the problems Clausewitz identified remain: as the cliché has it, ‘new solutions spawn new problems’ and new dependencies create new vulnerabilities.²¹⁵ Excessive focus on information operations ignores problems of implementation, such as whether tactical units can keep up in terms of logistics and movement. This is linked to the problem of potential information overload, whereby commanders cannot comprehend the immense ‘noise’ they are faced with:²¹⁶ as Clausewitz put it, ‘we know more, but this makes us more, not less, uncertain.’²¹⁷ Once all information has been collected it still has to be comprehended, interpreted, and acted upon. At all stages human fallibility and innumerable complications intervene, reflecting the eternal problem of

²¹¹ Whilst the concept of networked operations, loosely conceived, had certainly been around at least since the Second World War, the development of NCW as an outgrowth of the RMA only truly emerged in the late 1990s.

²¹² In such wars ‘information dominance’ becomes a primary objective. Some have also pointed to the notion of achieving ‘top-sight’ – knowledge of the whole board of chess, whilst the opponent only knows its own side.

²¹³ Force elements would thus be more agile, manoeuvrable and flexible, whilst reducing the demands on logistics and supply organisations.

²¹⁴ As Mitchell notes, ‘the end result of this sharing of information and awareness is the creation of additional combat power by enhancing the utility of information provided to decision-makers.’ Paul T. Mitchell, *Network Centric Warfare: Coalition Operations in the Age of US Military Primacy*, Adelphi Paper 385 (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 34.

²¹⁵ Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 111. An obvious potential new vulnerability is susceptibility to hacking or forms of cyber-attack.

²¹⁶ As Knox notes, ‘What has been absent...is the machinery to handle swiftly the resulting mass of data, much less to sift putative ‘signals’ from ‘noise’ and deception, to make judgements about the enemy’s effectiveness and intentions, and to discern his doctrinal and ideological blind spots while neutralising those of analysts and strategists. Continued and ever-deeper uncertainty, aggravated rather than relieved...is the result.’ Knox, ‘Conclusion’, p. 642.

²¹⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 117.

converting information into knowledge and knowledge into action.²¹⁸ Overemphasis on new technologies can also lead to a form of information dependence, distracting attention away from crucial intangibles such as morale, the orientation of allies, or the state of domestic opinion: such ‘strategic tunnel vision’²¹⁹ potentially downplays the value of human perception of cultural and political dynamics.²²⁰

The deepest cause for scepticism relates to the challenge of converting technological superiority into political effect. If indeed a revolution is taking place, it is principally occurring at tactical/operational levels, whereas in strategy success is not so narrowly dependent on better weaponry and equipment. Freedman notes that, ‘the real difficulty is that military power can only be truly judged against the political purposes it is intended to serve.’²²¹ Advanced systems may enable rapid victories against conventional forces, however this by no means guarantees their translation into meaningful political outcomes.²²² This is not to argue that information superiority and so forth is not worth attaining, only that it should not be seen as a ‘magical elixir’, particularly at the higher political levels of war.

So, should Clausewitz’s scepticism be viewed as hopelessly time-bound or rendered void by technological change? The weight of professional opinion would suggest not. As Gray succinctly concludes, ‘no technical panacea can

²¹⁸ Also, a misguided faith in the possibilities generated by new technologies may contribute to unreal expectations leading to disorientation when things go wrong as there is no direct causal link between better information and better military effects.

²¹⁹ Colin Gray, ‘The RMA and Intervention: A Sceptical View’, in Colin McInnes and Nicholas J. Wheeler (eds.), *Dimensions in Western Military Intervention* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 55.

²²⁰ ‘An appropriate understanding of the target’s culture and norms is also critical. The tendency to ‘mirror’ friendly cultural values and perspectives must be avoided at all costs. The preparation of IO [Information Operations] products and an evaluation of their potential effectiveness must be done from the perspective of the recipient (target audience) through their cultural lens.’ US Army War College, ‘Information Operations Primer’, November 2006. Available online at: <<http://www.iwar.org.uk/iwar/resources/primer/info-ops-primer.pdf>>, retrieved 4 June 2007.

²²¹ Freedman, *Revolution*, p. 68. Colin Gray also stresses the danger that, ‘Wise policy can be advanced by effective military power, but military power ceases to be strategically effective when in effect it is allowed into the driving seat of policy.’ Gray, ‘RMA’, p. 57.

²²² In some instances, reliance on technological solutions may actually hamper progress towards strategic goals. In Iraq, the decision to invade with small but highly mobile forces, based largely on the confidence provided by advanced technology, may be judged to have been a major strategic error. When widespread looting broke out and Iraqi state institutions ceased to function there were not enough troops on the ground to police the country and re-establish order and it was out of this chaos that the insurgency developed. See Frederick W. Kagan, ‘War and Aftermath’, *Policy Review*, No. 120, August 2003. Available online at: <<http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/3448101.html>>, retrieved 7 August 2006.

eliminate uncertainty altogether. Technology cannot revoke war's very nature.'²²³ Technology is perhaps one of those aspects of war that, for the outsider looking in or the deeply involved research scientist engrossed in the design of new inventions, can appear to offer a potentially decisive instrument – like the Byzantine navy's 'Greek fire'²²⁴ – that must surely open the door to decisive success.

Decision-making and probability

The paucity of reliable information is only further exacerbated by arguments and clashes of opinion amongst decision-makers, at all levels of war, and precisely because the lack of information inevitably leaves room for diverse judgements. Clausewitz explains how such disputes are often overlooked retrospectively because they are 'seen as the scaffolding that can be removed once the building is complete.'²²⁵ In other words, when we look back on a successful operation, for instance, it is rarely the difficult decisions that led to action that are the focus, but rather the action itself and its outcome – this has the effect of downplaying the fundamental problem of *choice* that decision-makers faced, so that 'what the layman gets to know of military events is usually nondescript...[and] it would be impossible to guess what obstacles were faced and overcome.'²²⁶ It is precisely in this way that it is said historians suffer from the vice of their virtues.²²⁷ Clausewitz, however, could not fail to recognise this problem as such paralysis in decision-making was in large part to blame for Prussia's defeat in 1806. Probably with such events in mind, he states that, 'Nowhere are differences of opinion so acute as in war, and fresh opinions never cease to batter at one's convictions.'²²⁸

In this respect, if there was ever a suitable subject for counter-factual reasoning, then strategic history is surely a prime contender. This is because 'what if' questions encourage consideration of the problems actors faced, often lost in narrative accounts: events are explained with an underlying air of

²²³ Gray, *Bloody*, p. 159.

²²⁴ Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory*, p. 140.

²²⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 131.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²²⁷ Booth, *Strategy*, p. 59.

²²⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 125.

inevitability to them. Of course, things did turn out as they did for good reason and thus lingering too long in this realm of ‘might-have-beens’ can be unhealthy – for things to have been different, the causes would also have had to be different²²⁹ – nevertheless, consideration of alternative futures can impress upon the observer the great uncertainty that always accompanies decision makers in war. In his study of the First World War, historian Niall Ferguson encourages counter-factual perspectives because he argues that it helps ‘to recapture the uncertainty of decision-makers in the past, to whom the future was merely a set of possibilities.’²³⁰

Likewise, Colin Gray has noted that ‘what is both interesting and important for a practical field like strategy is how and why strategic choices were made, given the unavailability of reliable crystal balls.’²³¹ He argues, following Clausewitz, that in making any critical assessments of past actions, ideally the reader should not know more than the commander knew at the time.²³² Gray makes this point in relation to his discussion of the nuclear strategists of the Cold War. He argues that in order to sensibly critique their ideas today, one has to remember the crucial point that they did not know, nor could they have possibly known, that the Cold War would end as it did – all their ideas were inevitably shaped by that reality.²³³ Theorists must constantly impress upon themselves the manifestly contingent futures faced by actors during war and not be deceived by the apparent inevitability events attain when viewed retrospectively. One only has to read Andrew Roberts’s masterful account of the complex and heated debates which characterised Allied coalition strategic planning during World War II to grasp the salience of this issue: how

²²⁹ Carr, *What is History?*, p. 97. Also, as Gat states ‘although discussion of alternatives, in order to illuminate the decisions and courses of action actually taken at the time, is an essential part of historical understanding, hypothetical cases are impossible to prove or disprove and ought not be pursued too seriously.’ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 702.

²³⁰ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War, 1914-1918* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. xlv. He has argued the benefits of counterfactual history in more detail in Niall Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (New York: Picador, 1997).

²³¹ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 305.

²³² Ibid., p. 305. Clausewitz states: ‘If the critic wishes to distribute praise or blame, he must certainly try to put himself exactly in the position of the commander; in other words, he must assemble everything the commander knew and the motives that affected his decision, and ignore all that he could not or did not know, especially the outcome. However, this is only an ideal to be aimed at, if never fully achieved: a situation giving rise to an event can never look the same to the analyst as it did to the participant.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 192.

²³³ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, pp. 302-06. Clausewitz notes that when we know the outcome ‘it is almost impossible to prevent the knowledge of it from colouring one’s judgement of the circumstances from which it arose.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 192.

exactly the war in the West was to be fought and won was by no means preordained.²³⁴

The negative effects or symptoms of uncertainty often include delay, hesitation, and vacillation. Such effects should not be confused with active strategies of delaying or avoiding battle, such as the Periclean²³⁵ or Fabian²³⁶ approach, although the latter's strategy may have derived principally from an indecisive psychological disposition rather than considered waiting. Moreover, to those not inured to uncertainty, the psychological consequences of poor intelligence can so relentlessly sap confidence as to induce great anxiety, if not outright panic and behavioural paralysis²³⁷ – consider for instance Ludendorff's nervous breakdown in 1918.²³⁸ Clausewitz notes how 'most generals, when they ought to act, are paralysed by unnecessary doubts.'²³⁹ As Booth states, 'to live with confusion is both psychologically uncomfortable and intellectually unsatisfying.'²⁴⁰

Irresolution and reluctance to act, Clausewitz notes, particularly harm those on the offensive, which generally requires continuous momentum, quick decision, and exploitation of the initiative: if the commander demands absolute certainty he will inevitably delay until the optimum moment for action has passed. A mind racked by uncertainty will always want that little bit more time to weigh up alternatives and to check all available information before acting. Much to his consternation, in 1809 Clausewitz had witnessed the strategic

²³⁴ As he states, 'Their decisions were produced through hard-fought interaction using logical debate and compromise, over many months of constant and unimaginable stress that would have shattered lesser men.' Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders: How Roosevelt, Churchill, Marshall and Alanbrooke Won the War in the West* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), p. 574.

²³⁵ In the early stages of the Archidamian War Pericles favoured a strategy of withdrawing inside the city walls of Athens and refusing to give battle on land against Sparta except for limited raids and cavalry operations. Donald Kagan, 'Athenian Strategy in the Peloponnesian War', in Murray et al, *Making of Strategy*, pp. 24-55.

²³⁶ Fabius Maximus was given the name 'Cunctator' or 'Delayer' because of his strategy of refusing to be drawn into pitched battle against Hannibal given his superior operational capabilities. Alvin H. Bernstein, 'The strategy of a warrior-state: Rome and the wars against Carthage, 264-201 B.C.', in Murray et al, *Making of Strategy*, pp. 56-84. Clausewitz notes that, 'All campaigns that are known for their so-called temporizing, like that of the famous Fabius Cunctator, were calculated primarily to destroy the enemy by making him exhaust himself.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 460.

²³⁷ Clausewitz notes that it is primarily in relation to strategic matters, when everything has to be guessed at and presumed' that 'most generals, when they ought to act, are paralysed by unnecessary doubts.' Ibid., p. 209.

²³⁸ 'On the night of 28 September his nerve cracked: he fell to the floor and according to some accounts foamed at the mouth.' See Strachan, *The First World War*, p. 314.

²³⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 209.

²⁴⁰ Booth, *Strategy*, p. 36.

consequences of such vacillation when Napoleon was close to collapse against the Austrians at Aspern-Essling in 1809 and the Prussian King, Frederick William failed to act: his hopeless message to the Austrian leaders was, 'One more victory and I am with you.'²⁴¹ The instances of such fatal indecision are legion. A notable example is that of Union commander, George McClellan during the American Civil War, who refused to take the offensive, even when armed with the enemy's campaign plan and with circumstances favouring action.²⁴² Conversely, to take examples from the same war, it was the unfailing determination, measured boldness, and decisive action of commanders such as Grant and Sherman or, for the Confederates, the tenacious cavalry commander Nathan Bedford Forrest, that gained them their reputations as military geniuses.²⁴³

Equally, however, uncertainty can also lead to overconfidence, even in the face of an enemy's massive numerical superiority because, after all, fortune can purportedly favour the bold. Clausewitz appears to suggest that a balanced reaction to uncertainty is required: 'While one man may lose his best chance through timidity...another will plunge in head first and end up looking as dazed and surprised as if he had just been fished out of the water.'²⁴⁴ As Clausewitz recognised, it is part of human nature to place confidence in one's own success, deriving from the fact that nothing is certain in war and that some will, as Kipling put it, 'risk it all on one turn of pitch and toss.'²⁴⁵ It was precisely this sentiment that lay behind Clausewitz's thinking in his passionate 'Political Declaration' of 1812: even against the odds, Prussia could gain courage in despair and 'even the destruction of liberty after a bloody and honourable struggle assures the people's rebirth.'²⁴⁶ 'It is true that the *probability* of success is against us... How can anyone demand the probability of success! It is enough

²⁴¹ Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 118.

²⁴² Richard Holmes describes McClellan as displaying 'caution bordering on paralysis.' Richard Holmes, 'McClellan, Maj Gen George Brinton', in Holmes, *Oxford Companion*, p. 525.

²⁴³ When Bedford Forrest found himself surrounded with an attack on both his front and rear, instead of panicking he ordered his cavalry to split and charge both ways, securing a victory over Union forces against the odds.

²⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 689.

²⁴⁵ Rudyard Kipling, 'If', in Wavell, *Other Men's Flowers*, p. 336.

²⁴⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, 'Political Declaration', in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 290.

that success is not *impossible*; whoever asks for more contradicts himself.’²⁴⁷ In that case, the bold actions of the Allies – perhaps against the odds – finally brought about Napoleon’s defeat.

The overriding consequence of this chronic uncertainty is that almost all major decisions will largely be based on ‘probability and inference’ and will be shaped by the psychological disposition of and nature of the relationships between the commanders and statesmen at the time rather than any universal standard. Clausewitz states that, ‘Circumstances vary so enormously in war, and are so indefinable, that a vast array of factors has to be appreciated – mostly in the light of probabilities alone.’²⁴⁸ As such, Clausewitz is adamant that in war reliable prediction is impossible: ‘absolute, so-called mathematical factors never find a firm basis in military calculations.’²⁴⁹ In a more objective sense, considering the course of any war as a whole, it is this unpredictability which entails that, as he puts it, ‘no prescriptive formulation universal enough to deserve that the name of law can be applied to the constant change and diversity of the phenomena of war.’²⁵⁰

Incidental friction

If the Enlightenment military thinkers had, in their rationalist, philosophical style,²⁵¹ conceived of military institutions as ‘mathematical reason in action’ or as great machines ‘where each part fulfilled its prescribed function, with no waste motion and no supernumerary cogs’,²⁵² then it was Clausewitz who shrewdly introduced the logical, adverse corollary of the metaphor, drawn from his wider reading of the literature on the physical sciences and the nascent

²⁴⁷ Clausewitz quoted in Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 302. This idea was reiterated in Clausewitz’s *Principles of War* when he stated that ‘even when the likelihood of success is against us, we must not think of our undertaking as unreasonable or impossible; for it is always reasonable, if we do not know of anything better to do, and if we make the best use of the few means at our disposal.’ Clausewitz, *Principles*, p. 13.

²⁴⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 130.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

²⁵¹ Coker notes how ‘Julien La Mettrie conceived of the true philosopher as an ‘engineer’; Denis Diderot compared social life to a great factory.’ Coker, *Waging War*, p. 52.

²⁵² Guerlac, ‘Vauban’, pp. 67-68. Henry Lloyd had often described the army as a great machine. Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 73. Clausewitz himself had used the analogy, albeit towards a different purpose, for instance when he states that ‘The military machine...is basically very simple and therefore seems easy to manage.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 138.

science of thermodynamics,²⁵³ through his concept of friction. Friction was notably absent in the military machines envisaged by the military *philosophes*, as if they operated in a vacuum, and Clausewitz endeavoured to correct this oversight. In *The Principles of War* Clausewitz compares the conduct of war to ‘the workings of an intricate machine with tremendous friction.’²⁵⁴ In *On War* he describes how, ‘Iron will power can overcome this friction...but of course it wears down the machine as well.’²⁵⁵ But as he makes clear in his study of *The Campaign of 1812 in Russia*, compiled in the early 1820s, the analogy does not entirely suffice: ‘The military instrument resembles a machine with tremendous friction, which unlike in mechanics, cannot be reduced to a few points, but is everywhere in contact with chance.’²⁵⁶

As Barry Watts has persuasively shown, the concept of friction can be understood in both its ‘incidental’ and ‘general’ manifestations. In the first instance, friction needs to be understood as a separate phenomenon explaining, as chance and uncertainty both do, a *particular* pervasive feature of war.²⁵⁷ This is true regardless of the extent to which the elements of chance and uncertainty are intimately bound up with the concept. Friction should be understood as a separate yet interlinked factor that contributes to the ‘family’ of ideas collectively referred to in the trinity as ‘chance and probability.’

The concept of friction appears fairly early in Clausewitz thinking,²⁵⁸ was developed in his study of Napoleon’s Russian campaign, and rapidly became a favoured concept, and indeed a major theme of *On War* that he believed perfectly described the unique type of problem he had in mind. This incidental friction is for Clausewitz an ‘unseen, all pervading element’ and a

²⁵³ Beyerchen, ‘Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery’.

²⁵⁴ Clausewitz, *Principles*, p. 61.

²⁵⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 138.

²⁵⁶ Clausewitz, ‘Campaign of 1812’, p. 165. This idea is repeated in *On War*: ‘This tremendous friction, which cannot, as in mechanics, be reduced to a few points, is everywhere in contact with chance...’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 139.

²⁵⁷ To be clear, friction should not be understood merely as a synonym for chance or uncertainty, nor in its incidental form, simply as a generic term encompassing those other concepts. As much as chance and uncertainty may contribute to friction, we maintain the analytical distinction between concepts that are intended to convey specific and unique ideas – before we can understand and analyse their interaction we should seek to understand them on their own terms.

²⁵⁸ Watts notes that the first known use was in a letter to Marie dated September 29, 1806. Writing about Scharnhorst, Clausewitz stated, ‘How much must the effectiveness of a gifted man be reduced when he is constantly confronted by the obstacles of convenience and tradition, when he is paralysed by constant friction with the opinions of others.’ Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction*, pp. 7-8.

‘force that theory can never quite define’,²⁵⁹ but its general features are quite clear, particularly when accompanied by the powerful metaphors he provides. It is a factor that reduces the efficiency of the whole and ‘impedes activity’²⁶⁰ through ‘natural inertia’²⁶¹ as ‘countless minor incidents...combine to lower the general level of performance.’²⁶² Colin Gray usefully describes friction as that which ‘can impede cumulatively the smooth performance of anything and everything.’²⁶³ A defining feature of the concept is precisely its *cumulative* nature, in the sense that a multitude of small ‘difficulties’ leads to much large problems. It conveys, as Beyerchen notes, the ‘amplification of a microcause to a macro-consequence, in a kind of cascade of things gone wrong.’²⁶⁴ Clausewitz states that ‘difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war.’²⁶⁵

This cumulative effect results largely from the nature of militaries, which like complex and intricate machines, are made up of many individual parts each with the potential to produce friction and make, as Clausewitz puts it, ‘the apparently easy so difficult’²⁶⁶ or, as he states elsewhere: ‘Everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.’²⁶⁷ It is these factors that make war ‘like movement in a resistant element’ and here Clausewitz employs the analogy of walking in water: ‘Just as the simplest and most natural of movements, walking, cannot easily be performed in water, so in war it is difficult for normal efforts to achieve even moderate results.’²⁶⁸ Friction is composed of all manner of difficulties that can be experienced in war, whether they be fatigue, command incoherence, adverse weather conditions, insufficient provisions and much more.²⁶⁹ He states that it would take volumes to cover all such difficulties.²⁷⁰ The physical exertions required and dangers faced in war contribute significantly

²⁵⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 140.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 141.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 702.

²⁶² Ibid., p. 138.

²⁶³ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 41.

²⁶⁴ Beyerchen, ‘Nonlinearity, and the Importance of Imagery’.

²⁶⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 138.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 140.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 138. This phrase appears in the same form in Clausewitz’s ‘Campaign of 1812’, p. 165.

²⁶⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 139. The analogy is also found in his study of the 1812 Campaign: ‘A movement made easily on land becomes very difficult under water.’ ‘The Campaign of 1812’, p. 166.

²⁶⁹ See Clausewitz, *Principles*, p. 64 and *On War*, p. 139.

²⁷⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 139.

to this friction, yet it appears Clausewitz wished to isolate them as independent problems comprising the more general friction which we will come to below.

Clausewitz explains that friction is ‘everywhere in contact with chance, and brings about effects that cannot be measured, just because they are largely due to chance.’²⁷¹ In his study of chance, Poincaré refers to the idea of the ‘theory of errors’ which essentially concerns a number of complex things causing errors – one can try to avoid most but, he states, ‘there still remain many which, though small, may become dangerous by the accumulation of their effects. It is from these accidental errors arise, and we attribute them to chance, because their causes are too complicated and too numerous...each of them would only produce a small effect; it is by their union and their number that their effects become formidable.’²⁷² This clearly reflects Clausewitz’s discussion of friction when he states that, ‘Often we encounter obstacles which were impossible to foresee’²⁷³ and that you can never know when one of the parts of the whole will ‘chance to delay things or somehow make them go wrong.’²⁷⁴ Friction, like chance, is not something that can be prevented or forestalled – all one can do is attempt to limit its effects and be ever mindful of its universal presence.

General friction

So far we have discussed the prominent concepts associated with this trinity in theoretical isolation to arrive at a firmer understanding of their distinctive features. However, as was evident in his earlier *The Principles of War*, Clausewitz also believed that it was possible for these factors to be conceived of in a more unitary sense. All these factors, along with danger – the ‘debilitating element’ – and physical exertion, correspond in respect of their ‘restrictive effect’ on war and as Clausewitz argued, for this reason ‘can be grouped into a single concept of *general friction*.’²⁷⁵ As a number of interpreters of Clausewitz have concluded, the various concepts discussed in this chapter, coalesce to

²⁷¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 139.

²⁷² Poincaré, *Science and Method*, pp. 74-75.

²⁷³ Clausewitz, *Principles*, p. 64.

²⁷⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 139.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 141. Emphasis added.

comprise a 'compound' concept of general friction. There are clearly many overlaps in relation to the individual concepts discussed above, such as chance and uncertainty, but the idea of general friction should be regarded primarily as a means to collectively perceive all the various ways in which activity in war is impeded everywhere and at every stage. The basic nature of the force being described is essentially analogous to that associated with incidental friction, but here it encompasses the whole range of factors inherently associated with action in war and is less immediately negative in its effects. At this general level, war is comparable to movement through a resistant element in a more fundamental and comprehensive respect than that of incidental friction.

In Watt's excellent study, he draws attention to other potential sources of general friction, which are identifiable in Clausewitz's wider work and which allow for a more comprehensive conception of the concept and which we have touched upon in the course of our discussion. In particular, he draws attention to the political constraints on the use of force and the intractable difficulty of matching military means to political ends.²⁷⁶ Whatever factors we include, the overarching thrust of the issue is clear, as is the extent to which this friction permeates the entire gamut of war, from those determining the political object to the individual soldier.

The idea of general friction can perhaps most usefully serve as a descriptive for the family concept of 'chance' as presented in this tendency of the trinity. Importantly, we do not need to subscribe to a rigid delineation between those dimensions of this tendency: chance, uncertainty, friction, and so on. Rather, this analysis has simply attempted to derive some of the essential features of these concepts and to reveal how they combine to form a potent aspect of war's intrinsic nature. The various elements coalesce to form a general friction which serves to distinguish war on paper from war in reality. Whilst the identification of this intrinsically restrictive force in war may seem like cause for outright negativity, this would be a mistaken conclusion and one which Clausewitz sought to correct. The friction characteristic of this tendency may be objectively restrictive, but – given war's multilateral and interactive nature – is

²⁷⁶ Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction*, pp. 30-32.

always necessarily relative. In this light, it is the 'frictional differential'²⁷⁷ between belligerents that is crucial. We will explore these issues further below.

Playing the game of war

War, states Clausewitz, can be compared to a game of chance. Though most decisions in war are based on probabilities, even the use of sophisticated probability theory would not suffice to overcome the problems faced. Rather, 'Through the element of chance, guesswork and luck come to play a large part in war.'²⁷⁸ In its danger and seriousness war is perhaps most akin to Russian Roulette,²⁷⁹ but this does not convey the extraordinary talents required, which are perhaps more accurately captured in the analogy with a game of cards, such as poker, where it is 'a matter of skill as well as odds.'²⁸⁰ In the latter, one's fate, whilst still subject to the laws of probability, is more heavily dependent on the choices of the player, whilst in the former one's fate is left purely to chance. In his analysis of Napoleon's 1799 campaign, Clausewitz states that, since war 'always has something of the nature of a game, the conduct of war cannot avoid this element at every stage, and the commander, who has little inclination for the game, will, without anticipating it, be left behind the line and will fall into deep debt in the great account book of military success.'²⁸¹ But in poker, apart from the possibility of losing one's life-savings, rarely can it be said to take place in a climate comparable to that of war. What makes war such a unique game of chance is precisely this mixture of uncertainty with ever-present danger, fear, physical exertion and, for the commander and policymaker, an enormous burden of responsibility: so 'luck in war' Clausewitz remarks 'is of a higher quality than luck in gambling.'²⁸² In order to cope in such conditions great talent is required and those who rely on rigid principles will most likely fail.

²⁷⁷ Watts, *Clausewitzian Friction*, p. 53.

²⁷⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 96.

²⁷⁹ Ramman Kenoun once remarked: 'Think of war as a game of Russian roulette. It is a game of chance with your life as the prize.'

²⁸⁰ Alan Beyerchen, 'Clausewitz and the Non-Linear System of War: Systems of Organized Complexity', in Strachan and Rothe, *Clausewitz*, p. 53.

²⁸¹ Quoted in Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), p. 144.

²⁸² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 195.

In his explication of the trinity Clausewitz argues that it is mainly the commander and the army that have to play the dangerous game of war through the use of personal courage and talent. This is no easy task. Indeed, as Herbig explains, much of *On War* is geared towards arming the commander for this 'relentless struggle with the unforeseen.'²⁸³ Yet no book of principles alone can provide the requisite tools to face such a ephemeral foe. As Paret explains, Clausewitz believed it is 'the creative employment of intellectual and psychological strengths that alone can overcome friction, exploit chance, and turn the imponderables into an asset.'²⁸⁴ In this respect, Moran is certainly correct to suggest that genius is the 'intelligence and willpower of the commander that moves the machinery of war forward, despite the friction that impedes it.'²⁸⁵ The qualities of genius represent the 'counterweight'²⁸⁶ to the effects of chance and uncertainty or, as Clausewitz puts it, 'With uncertainty in one scale, courage and self-confidence must be thrown into the other to correct the balance.'²⁸⁷ Creveld is to the point when he writes that the history of command in war 'consists essentially of an endless quest for certainty' and one he concludes that is ultimately futile.²⁸⁸

Here a definite dualism is apparent. This tendency fundamentally concerns the inherent interrelationship between the condition of chance and uncertainty on the one hand and the consequent human reaction to that condition on the other: they form two sides of the same coin. Yet, as presented here so far, the relationship may appear somewhat unbalanced, with chance dictating terms to the submissive human will: the one leading, the other following and reacting. However, a more accurate conception, from a theoretical viewpoint, is one of mutual dependence and even symbiosis between the two perspectives. This is explained by the important recognition that it is precisely human creativity, free

²⁸³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 117.

²⁸⁴ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 373.

²⁸⁵ Moran describes genius as 'friction's theoretical compliment', Moran, 'Strategic Theory', p. 8. At the end of Clausewitz's chapter explaining the concept of friction he states that 'an eminent commander needs more than experience and a strong will. He must have other exceptional abilities as well.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 140.

²⁸⁶ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 108.

²⁸⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 97.

²⁸⁸ He goes on to state that Clausewitz's observation on uncertainty remains as true today as it was when first written down, against the background of incomparably simpler circumstances, a hundred and fifty years ago.' Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 264 and 266.

will, boundless imagination, and choice which is itself a fundamental cause of the condition of chance and uncertainty in war.

Put simply, the fact that the enemy is a living and thinking entity with a will of its own is a major source of chance and uncertainty – war is never activity aimed at inanimate matter.²⁸⁹ As Gray states, ‘War is a duel and the enemy may prove uncooperative.’²⁹⁰ Humans, as Hannah Arendt stressed in her political philosophy, ‘are creative...they can bring forward something so new that nobody foresaw it.’²⁹¹ The same applies in war, which is itself an expression of politics. Even absent the unpredictability of the physical sources of chance, this fundamental reality may appear, almost paradoxically, to be *both problem and solution*. Consequently, the apparent relationship that emerges between chance and creativity is less one of leader and follower and more one of ‘chicken and egg’, especially when war is viewed properly, as Clausewitz insisted it always should be, as an interactive whole. Uncertainty not only derives from human ignorance, but from our more positive capacity for creative, unexpected, and counterintuitive behaviour – particularly in activities involving competition and confrontation such as politics and war.

Genius: the creative talent

As we noted earlier, in his description of military genius, Clausewitz was echoing many of those attributes which Machiavelli had identified some three hundred years earlier in his concept of *virtù*, whilst examining them in a more systematic and analytical fashion. Considering that fact that the science of psychology was only in its infancy, as Clausewitz himself acknowledged, his penetrating analysis in Book 1, Chapter 3 constitutes one of the jewels of his work. Clausewitz prefaced his discussion with the observation that genius is the combination of certain qualities of mind and temperament that are specific to war and that may not necessarily be appropriate elsewhere (although he draws on artistic genius to explore his ideas). It is important here to emphasise that the ‘gifts’ of genius are precisely those which apply to the peculiar climate of war,

²⁸⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 173.

²⁹⁰ Gray, *Bloody*, p. 46.

²⁹¹ Hannah Arendt quoted in Patricia Owens, ‘Beyond Strauss: Arendt’s critique of neoconservatism’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2, April 2007, p. 280.

that of its danger, exertion, chance, and uncertainty. This serves to underline the *duality* of the two central ('family') ideas that comprise this element of the trinity: those of chance and creativity. The peculiar qualities required in war are different from those of pure understanding, intellect, or even technical knowledge. Rather, for Clausewitz, genius is a mixture of intellect and emotional qualities, 'a blend of brains and temperament' is required.²⁹²

As Strachan notes, 'The romantic in Clausewitz had to embrace the military genius, the rationalist had to define him.'²⁹³ So, just how did Clausewitz define genius. Genius in war, he explained, must be grounded in courage. However, if the old adage confirms that discretion is the larger part of valour, then Clausewitz emphasised a form of courage that was not wild, but more controlled and educated.²⁹⁴ Courage encompasses such traits as boldness, presence of mind (such as dealing with the unexpected or keeping one's nerve),²⁹⁵ strength of will (in the face of anxiety and crushing responsibility), as well as the ability to take risks and to trust in fortune. Purely rational thinking would struggle to cope with or even be overwhelmed by the lack of evidence and certainty in war, so rather a form of intellectual instinct or *coup d'oeil* – 'the quick recognition of a truth'²⁹⁶ – reinforced by determination was necessary,²⁹⁷ and which would enable the commander to turn knowledge into ability.²⁹⁸ The military genius would also need to possess adaptability and creativity, combined with 'great strength of character, as well as lucidity and firmness of mind...in order to follow through steadily, to carry out the plan, and not to be thrown off course by a thousand diversions.'²⁹⁹ All this requires great energy or what

²⁹² Man 'derives his most vigorous support...from that blend of brains and temperament which we have learned to recognize in the qualities of determination, firmness, staunchness, and strength of character.' Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 130-31.

²⁹³ Strachan, *Biography*, p. 127.

²⁹⁴ This aspect of courage, Paret notes, had been identified by Major von Sydow, who held that 'Raw courage is a wild horse that has shed its reins; it is a form of senseless drunkenness, a rage that throws itself thoughtlessly into danger because it does not know how to judge either the danger itself or the means with which danger can be overcome.' This idea may have impressed Clausewitz who believed regarding true genius, 'courage is led by a dominant intelligence.' Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 54-55.

²⁹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 119-20.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁹⁷ As Clausewitz states, 'the role of determination is to limit the agonies of doubt and the perils of hesitation when the motives for action are inadequate' and that 'Determination, which dispels doubt, is a quality that can be aroused only by the intellect.' *Ibid.*, pp. 118 and 119.

²⁹⁸ This point is made by Clausewitz in Book 1, Chapter 3 and at the end of Book 2, Chapter 2. *Ibid.*, pp. 130-31 and 170-71.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

Clausewitz terms a spirit of endeavour.³⁰⁰ Importantly, and recalling his indebtedness to Machiavelli, genius is not just about offsetting uncertainty but actively exploiting it – after all war is a form of duel and both sides suffer from the uncertainty that is part of its nature – thus one can attempt to turn uncertainty to one's own advantage.³⁰¹

Individuals of great ability continue to exert an enormous influence in war, for instance, consider the enormous influence of the American general David Petraeus in recent years.³⁰² Echevarria also makes the point that Clausewitz's framework of genius is by no means limited to conventional military figures³⁰³ – for instance, the ideas can be extended to guerrilla leaders such as Mao, counterinsurgent masterminds such as Sir Gerald Templer,³⁰⁴ or even terrorist masterminds such as Osama bin Laden.³⁰⁵ However, in the face of the growing complexity of war, a notable feature of modern warfare has been the increasing collegiality of command and the rise of sprawling military bureaucracies and planning staffs.³⁰⁶ During the nineteenth century General Staffs emerged which increasingly took responsibility for many of the decisions that would formerly have taken place in the commander's mind.³⁰⁷ As a result, genius has become increasingly dissociated from the great individual and supplanted by considerations of bureaucratic efficiency and consensual decision-making (particularly in multinational coalition operations). These changes have

³⁰⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 121-22.

³⁰¹ Gray, *War, Peace, and Victory*, p. 113.

³⁰² In fact, Petraeus possessed that trait of genius noted in the foregoing discussion. As the Economist remarks, 'General Petraeus benefited from some good luck...Sunni tribes were already rising up against al-Qaeda's murderous followers before the [2007] surge [of US troops]...But fortune smiles on a military commander who knows how to exploit a good opportunity.' *The Economist*, 'Fighting insurgencies: Reluctant warriors', 14 March 2009, p. 85.

³⁰³ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 118.

³⁰⁴ Templer was the driving intelligence behind the British defeat of communist rebels of the Malayan National Liberation Army during the Malayan Emergency in the early 1950s. His methods and tactics have been held up as a model for subsequent counterinsurgency operations. He focused on winning over the 'hearts and minds' of the population combined with the resettlement of ethnic Chinese, inducements to surrendering rebels, granting of citizenship to Malays, restriction of food supply, and a robust intelligence gathering system. The Emergency was officially declared over in 1960.

³⁰⁵ Although it is perhaps his chief lieutenant, Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri who is the true strategic brains behind the al-Qaeda organisation.

³⁰⁶ Incidentally, with their origins principally in Clausewitz's Prussia.

³⁰⁷ Rosello notes how during the Napoleonic era, 'In most cases it was the supreme commander who acted as the overall intelligence analyst for the field army, choosing and discarding information as he saw fit.' Rosello, 'Clausewitz's Contempt', p. 107. Bond notes how, following Moltke's achievements, general staffs were increasingly recognised as the essential 'brain of the army.' Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 79.

primarily been functional imperatives to respond to the expanded dimensions and varieties of knowledge required in modern war. However these developments have encouraged practices and behaviour often unsuited to dealing with the uncertainties of war.

In the decades leading up to 1914, war planning became an obsession of European staffs, yet, as events were to reveal, brilliant execution of the wrong plan can be extremely dangerous. The French strict adherence to 'Plan XVII' led to dispositions and movements almost wilfully unsuited to unfolding events.³⁰⁸ This is not to argue that detailed planning is unimportant. Rather, the danger is that rigid plans can become confused with future reality, when in fact no simulation or blueprint for war, no matter how sophisticated, can entirely account for unpredictable events and uncertainties that will inevitably be encountered, from the tactical to the political levels. Dogmatic planning can encourage a mistaken belief that victory can be orchestrated in advance: as Moltke quipped, no plan survives contact with the enemy and Gray quotes Admiral Wylie who stated that 'planning for certitude is the greatest of all military mistakes.'³⁰⁹ In this respect, the genius of the overall commander can be the crucial factor preserving the element of *coup d'oeil*, flexibility, and adaptability in the face of failed plans and unexpected occurrences.

Military virtues

So far we have concentrated principally on the realm of the higher command in war, but we must also consider features evident throughout the whole panoply of war, down to the tactical level. On inspection, it is evident that many iconic images associated with war-making institutions are largely functions of war's climate of danger, exertion, chance, and uncertainty. Indeed, one of the central problems in war is how to create soldiers who are willing to risk their lives in what Clausewitz calls, 'this debilitating element'³¹⁰ and stand-fast in the face of

³⁰⁸ That is, seventeen since the first plan was developed in 1875. For an account of the development of French war-plans see Gat, *Military Thought*, pp. 382-440. As Gat states, 'the French deployment according to Plan 17 allowed for great flexibility. The French merely had to keep an open mind and maintain their freedom of operation. Only they did not. Rather than wait...they committed themselves to a major offensive in Lorraine', p. 436.

³⁰⁹ Quoted in Gray, *Bloody*, p. 286.

³¹⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 133.

potential death. As Dyer notes, ‘Soldiers in battle, however stable they may appear, are always a potential mob capable of panic and flight.’³¹¹ Desertion, mutiny, and the collapse of morale are the nightmares of generals. Consequently, throughout history, armed groups of all persuasions have developed a diverse range of mechanisms (both consciously and unconsciously) to overcome such problems, even if they sometimes solidified into cultural habits that no longer truly served their original purpose³¹² – nevertheless, where the latter occurred, military necessity, and the requirement to adapt or die, generally engendered the discarding or remoulding of out-dated forms. Clausewitz discussed such issues – within the broader rubric of moral forces in war – through the concepts of ‘military virtues’ and ‘military spirit’, which in fighting forces he regarded as the ‘steering quality, [the] refinement of base ore into precious metal.’³¹³

This subject has received great attention throughout history (being as it is, central to the effectiveness of any armed force). We noted how Machiavelli’s *virtù* extended to such issues, drawing on a wide range of sources extending back to Ancient Greece and Rome. Many of the qualities which Clausewitz recognised as vital in command are increasingly required by soldiers at all levels as closed order formations have been increasingly replaced by more open fighting, such as skirmishing or guerrilla operations, demanding the ‘free play of intelligence, the clever merging of boldness with caution.’³¹⁴

Clausewitz believed that foremost amongst the virtues that can reduce friction in fighting forces is simply combat experience or ‘long familiarity with danger’,³¹⁵ and described it as ‘the only lubricant that will reduce the abrasion of friction.’³¹⁶ He noted how, ‘Habit hardens the body for great exertions, strengthens the heart in great peril, and fortifies judgement against first

³¹¹ Gwynne Dyer, *War: The Lethal Custom* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), p. 21.

³¹² See Martin van Creveld, *The Culture of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008).

³¹³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 221.

³¹⁴ Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 127

³¹⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 133.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141. Courage, Clausewitz held, might be spurred by taking the initiative, and enhanced by the spirit derived from victories and confidence in the commander, pp. 437-38. This phenomenon is revealed, for instance, in Che Guevara’s account of the Cuban Revolutionary War, where through a brutal baptism of fire, followed by a number of successes, and growing experience, the spirit of the rebel group was bolstered and with it the effectiveness of their force. The state of morale is a major theme throughout the work. Guevara, *Reminiscences*.

impressions.’³¹⁷ This reflects Thucydides’ belief that ‘the ones who come out on top are the ones who have been trained in the hardest school.’³¹⁸ Also, for those militaries without direct experience of war, efforts are often made to provide troops with training approaching true battlefield conditions, although, as Clausewitz recognised, ‘peacetime maneuvers are a feeble substitute for the real thing’.³¹⁹ Perhaps the most extreme instance of this was the Spartans practice of an annual ‘war’ waged against the Helots as part of their training. During World War I ‘realism training’ was advocated by Fuller³²⁰ and in World War II, ‘green troops’ were put through realistic drills which became known as ‘battle inoculation’, intended to familiarise them with the character of the battlefield and bolster morale.³²¹ Variations of war-gaming throughout history attempts to provide commanders and soldiers with a taste of the problems they may encounter in combat, whilst some, such as early medieval tournaments, almost amounted to forms of war themselves.³²² Military training aims to instil confidence and courage in soldiers, as well as psychologically preparing them to kill – US Marines Corp training is notorious in this respect.³²³ Training also seeks to foster bonds of brotherhood, comradeship, and group cohesion, underpinned by the imperative to ‘not let one’s mates down.’

Also, the development of detailed military doctrine has become a central means to overcome uncertainty given the complexity and technicality of modern warfare.³²⁴ Dyer notes how militaries are often criticised for reducing action to routines and rules, but ‘all it amounts to in practice, is a desperate and partially successful attempt to reduce the immense number of variables [in war].’³²⁵ This is true, but doctrine can also be greatly counter-productive due to the rigidity of

³¹⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 141.

³¹⁸ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, p. 85.

³¹⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 141.

³²⁰ Bourke, *Intimate History*, p. 85.

³²¹ David French, *Raising Churchill’s Armies: The British Army and the War Against Germany 1919-1945* (Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 205-06. Battle inoculation involved crawling over ground under live gunfire, with loud explosions all around, and surprise targets to deal with. Bourke, *Intimate History*, pp. 87-88.

³²² For an overview of war-gaming through history, see Creveld, *The Culture of War*, pp. 64-83.

³²³ For an overview of the West Point training process see Dyer, *Lethal Custom*, pp. 38-62.

³²⁴ The US Army, for instance, has thousands of pages of doctrinal publications or ‘Field Manuals’ covering topics as diverse as ‘Religious Support’, ‘Aviation Life Support System Maintenance Management and Training Programs’, ‘Jungle Training’ and so on and so forth. One list of current (2008) manuals has well over 500 such documents.

Available online at: <http://www.army.mil/usapa/doctrine/Active_FM.html>, retrieved 12 September 2008.

³²⁵ Dyer, *Lethal Custom*, p. 12.

thinking it encourages. Clausewitz warned that, in war ‘theoretical directives tend to be less useful here than in any other sphere.’³²⁶ The dangers of such ‘methodism’ was revealed in Vietnam, where ‘Doctrine became dogma’³²⁷ and the US army found it difficult to adapt to the very different demands of counterinsurgency, being as they were, geared to fight large scale conflicts. Of course, in 1806 Clausewitz had witnessed the ‘most downright stupidity to which methodicism ever led.’³²⁸ It is little wonder that the new Prussian Army Regulations of 1812, which Clausewitz helped draft, placed an emphasis on flexibility, initiative, and exploitation of the unexpected.³²⁹

Discipline and drill represent historic practices – systematised foremost by the Romans³³⁰ – that derive from the imperative to ‘stand fast in the face of the enemy...without giving way to the natural impulses of fear and panic.’³³¹ Clausewitz notes how such practices form an ‘army that maintains its cohesion under the most murderous fire; that cannot be shaken by imaginary fears and resists well-founded ones with all its might.’³³² Strict discipline has often served as a substitute where soldiers have been reluctant to fight. At times, outright coercion has been ruthlessly applied: the gruesome image of the soldier advancing into battle with a bayonet pressed to his back. Indeed, the term ‘decimation’ comes from the Roman punishment of executing every tenth man from units who were defeated or otherwise humiliated in battle.³³³ Such practices have been witnessed in the modern era; for instance, Italian general Cadorna reintroduced ‘decimation’ during the World War I.³³⁴

In addition to experience, training, discipline, and doctrine, countless other ways of preparing troops for the dangers and uncertainties of war have

³²⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 161.

³²⁷ George K. Osborn, ‘Foreword’ in Andrew F. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. xiii.

³²⁸ Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, pp. 311-12.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³³⁰ Christopher Coker, *Waging War*, pp. 38-43. Coker notes how outstanding Roman drill and discipline partly explains why Romans rarely produced famous generals: they simply didn’t require them.

³³¹ Parker describes it as ‘one of most ‘pervasive and unchanging elements of human civilisation: the Twelfth Dynasty Egyptian armies of 1900 BC stepped off ‘by the left’ and so has every army down to the present day.’ Geoffrey Parker, ‘The Western Way of War’, in Geoffrey Parker (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Warfare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.

³³² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 220.

³³³ Murray et al, *Making of Strategy*, pp. 60-61.

³³⁴ Strachan notes that Italian military discipline was particularly harsh during the war. 750 soldiers were executed – the highest number of any army. Strachan, *First World War*, p. 250.

been adopted. Aspects of the institutional character of most military organisations reflect this. Strict and formalised hierarchies ensure orders are followed in the confusion of war, especially when things do not proceed according to plan. Regiments often serve as substitute families, whilst their insignia, flags (or ‘colours’),³³⁵ distinctive uniforms, ceremonies, and histories,³³⁶ all serve to foster a culture of duty, valour, and group belonging – all effective lubricants in conditions of unrelenting danger and disorientating confusion.³³⁷ Such characteristics are not exclusive to formal Western military institutions. In the brutal conflicts in West Africa during the 1990s, rebel forces, such as the RUF in Sierra Leone, wore distinctive American sports gear, were branded with tattoos, and adopted *nome de guerres*.³³⁸ Also, guerrilla forces and terrorist organisations frequently adopt the *nomenclatura* and insignia of regular militaries. Clausewitz describes how fighters will ‘think of themselves as a member of a guild, in whose...customs the spirit of war is given pride of place.’³³⁹ Efforts to boost troop morale and courage can take many forms, such as inspiring eve-of-battle speeches, attempts to persuade the troops of the virtuousness of the cause through propaganda and political indoctrination, and measures to encourage the vilification of the enemy.³⁴⁰ For instance, ‘hate-training’³⁴¹ during World War II was briefly implemented: encouraging hatred was seen by some as the best way of increasing combat effectiveness.³⁴² Again,

³³⁵ The French went into battle behind colours and bands as late as the September 1915 offensive in Champagne of 1915. Keegan, *Face of Battle*, p. 212.

³³⁶ Howard notes how ‘The regimental historian...has, consciously or unconsciously, to sustain the view that his regiment has usually been flawlessly brave and efficient...knowing full well that his work is to serve a practical purpose in sustaining regimental morale in the future.’ Howard, *Causes*, p. 189.

³³⁷ Yet there are dangers as Howard points out: ‘The young soldier in action for the first time may find it impossible to bridge the gap between war as it has been painted and war as it really is – between the way in which he, his peers, his officers and his subordinates should behave, and the way in which they actually do. He may be dangerously unprepared for cowardice and muddle and horror when he actually encounters them...’ Howard, *Causes*, p. 189.

³³⁸ See David Keen, *Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone* (New York: Palgrave, 2005).

³³⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 219.

³⁴⁰ Bourke, *Intimate History*, p. 84.

³⁴¹ Joanna Bourke describes the ‘hate training’ that took place in British Army battle schools in 1941 and 1942: ‘recruits had to go through a gruelling, mile-long assault and obstacle course. Loudspeakers chanting ‘Kill that Hun. Kill that Hun’ and ‘Remember Hong Kong. It might have been you’ taunted and disorientated recruits following the course...They were instructed to fire their own weapons at imitation German and Japanese soldiers. When they arrived at the section which involve a bayonet charge, recruits were showered with sheep’s blood. At another stage in their training, recruits were taken to slaughterhouses and they were exposed to a ‘hall of hate’ consisting of pictures of German atrocities in Poland’, *Ibid.*, p. 154.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 151-52.

in Sierra Leone, RUF child soldiers were fed cocaine for courage and sent as advanced guards, or 'bait', to test the strength of government forces.³⁴³

Also, at a more personal level, if, as Clausewitz stated, 'what is most needed in the lower ranks is courage and self-confidence',³⁴⁴ then soldiers throughout history have adopted almost infinitely diverse ways of reconciling themselves to the dangers and uncertainties of war, such as taking drugs,³⁴⁵ drinking alcohol,³⁴⁶ saying prayer, singing songs, covering themselves in war paint,³⁴⁷ and finding consolation in religion or even Stoic philosophy.³⁴⁸

All these examples are intended purely as an indication of the extent to which the common images and practices we associate with warfare derive largely from the inherent nature of war. But, as Clausewitz believed, none of these measures, except experience of war itself, can truly prepare the soldier for the emotional intensity and sheer confusion of *actual* combat. As he states, 'discipline, skill, goodwill, a certain pride, and high morale...have no strength of their own. They stand or fall together. One crack and the whole thing goes, like glass too quickly cooled.'³⁴⁹ Like the best lubricants, they can only reduce the friction of war, but not entirely eradicate it.³⁵⁰

³⁴³ This was a widespread practice in Sierra Leone (and other conflicts in the region). Often the children's legs were cut and a mixture of cocaine and gunpowder (to induce aggression) were rubbed into the wounds. Some rebels were seen cutting incisions in their own faces and inserting brown or white powder. Keen quotes a peace worker who had been captured by the rebel West Side Boys: 'When they want to do evil, that's when they take the drugs so that they can have the boldness to do it.' Keen, *Sierra Leone*, pp. 76 and 231-32.

³⁴⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 162.

³⁴⁵ This was a widespread practice in Vietnam. An estimated 30 percent of forces took hard drugs. Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 93.

³⁴⁶ John Keegan tells of a Union Colonel at the battle of Shiloh on April 1862 who, new to battle, 'was palpably drunk, unable to give orders and had to be put under arrest by his brigadier. Whether he had been drunk all night or got drunk over breakfast was not established. Either state was perfectly credible in the first year of the Civil War.' John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 165.

³⁴⁷ Martin van Creveld notes in relation to the practice of applying war paint, that soldiers 'hope to draw courage by engaging in a ceremonial act as well as to mark the transition from an existence in which one's life is generally safe into another where it is in constant jeopardy.' Creveld, *The Culture of War*, p. 5.

³⁴⁸ See Sherman, *Stoic Warriors*. Sherman begins her study by recounting the story of an American prisoner of war in Vietnam who found strength to ensure the ordeal in his knowledge of the writings of Epictetus, pp. 1-9.

³⁴⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 222.

³⁵⁰ In different contexts, certain of these 'military virtues' may be more or less appropriate and excellence in all is not a prerequisite of success. For instance, Clausewitz suggests irregular troops may substitute for strict discipline, 'natural warlike qualities' of bravery, adaptability, stamina and enthusiasm. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

Implications

In this chapter we have analysed some of the most important aspects of this tendency in the light of the influences on Clausewitz's ideas to better appreciate the continuing validity of Clausewitz's insights despite great changes in war's contexts. The analysis could not be exhaustive, however the discussion will have revealed some of the most notable manifestations of this tendency as being integral to the nature of war. To conclude it will be useful to consider some of the implications of this analysis from a theoretical perspective.

The externality of chance and uncertainty?

Bassford argues this element of the trinity is the only one which is exclusively concerned with the 'objective externality' of war, which for him consists of, 'The physical world (including mountains, roads, weather [etc]...in short, everything we cannot alter at once by merely wishing) *and* of the personalities, capabilities, hopes [etc]... the human ecology within which the participants' perceptions, plans, and actions must co-evolve.'³⁵¹ This conception is useful and undoubtedly captures a vital dimension of this element. It forces us to conceive of 'chance and probability' as something 'out there', as characterising the conditions within which action takes place in war. Herbig makes this point when she describes Clausewitz's conception of chance as being 'out of human reach.'³⁵²

Yet, this perspective, important and correct as it is to a point, does not suffice entirely. It ignores the vital complementary aspect to the element which, as we have seen, is in fact an internal feature of the actors involved in war, namely 'the creative spirit' which enables actors to apply means in novel ways to produce the desired effects. Furthermore, we have considered the extent to which concepts such as chance and uncertainty are not only a function of an external reality, but also exist as a characteristic of actors' internal predicament, intellectual capacity, or psychological condition: it is not so much that the objective environment is by nature uncertain, but rather the fact that actors in

³⁵¹ Bassford, 'The Primacy of Policy', p. 89.

³⁵² Herbig, 'Chance and Uncertainty', p. 98.

war experience, or even suffer from, the inner subjective feeling of uncertainty that is perhaps most important. To reduce this tendency to an examination purely of war's external reality would therefore be somewhat mistaken. Nevertheless, an external 'concrete reality' identified by Bassford is certainly implicated in the meaning of the tendency. It would be somewhat unfair to claim that such factors as the weather, disease, or even the actions of the enemy, are not fundamentally external manifestations of chance.

In a imaginary world of God-like omniscient beings the word chance would presumably not exist, because all effects would have a definite cause and the outcome of any action would be known in advance – in such a world, perhaps Creveld is right to suggest that there would be no war (if the result is known in advance there would be no point in fighting).³⁵³ Yet, war *is* a human activity, with all the intellectual shortcomings, passions, and unpredictable behaviour that entails: some events and outcomes will always be unexpected, unpredictable, and unknowable. Whilst Bassford is perhaps correct to present chance as an external element of war, because that is how it *appears*, chance is also partly a function of human nature and describes something we experience, not only that is simply 'out there'. It is also an aspect of war that is only overcome through human creative ability, genius, judgement, virtue, and skill; the practical endeavour of the art of war.

Ambiguity and strategic neutrality

The second central implication to outline here is the inherent ambiguity of this tendency when considered as a whole. Enlightenment theorists prior to Clausewitz viewed chance in an almost universally negative light and one's instinct might be to support such a view. However, Clausewitz developed a more realistic and balanced conception of these forces, both in terms of how they are experienced by humans and in terms of their objective impact on war. Regarding the latter, Echevarria stresses that friction and chance are not in themselves forces which do or do not lead to extremes; rather they are the medium in which such interactions develop. Friction cannot itself stop war from escalating – 'at times the forces that drive war are strong enough to overcome

³⁵³ Creveld, *Transformation*, p. 171.

inertia or friction; at other times they are not.³⁵⁴ Whilst it is one of the forces that makes absolute war nothing but a logical fantasy,³⁵⁵ in war in reality it is utterly ambiguous in relation to escalation (for instance, over-estimation of the enemy's forces may lead to escalation, but equally uncertainty can cause vacillation, hesitation, and paralysis).

From a more subjective strategic perspective, and in a respect somewhat comparable to Machiavelli's concept of fortune, this tendency is neither necessarily a strictly positive or negative force. Chance, uncertainty, and friction will invariably be experienced by all sides in any war. Herbig notes that, 'chance remains neutral' and it is best perceived as ambivalent in terms of its particular impact on belligerents. Handel reiterates this point, stating that 'friction, chance, uncertainty (the probabilistic nature of war), luck, etc are to be regarded as 'neutral factors'.³⁵⁶ Chance events can create possibilities and opportunities to be exploited, or equally dash the best laid plans. It can cause the complete failure of a campaign such as the 'divine wind' which twice frustrated thirteenth century Mongol invasion of Japan,³⁵⁷ or it can decisively support a surprise move that one undertakes.³⁵⁸ Given a rough equality between belligerents in relation to these factors, this is where military genius, political acumen, effective intelligence techniques, combat experience, superior morale, flexible planning, rigorous training, and other crucial factors can play their part in facing, taming, or exploiting the uncertain climate of war.

Friction may never be eliminated entirely, and objectively it may be considered a negative or restrictive force, but when considered relative to the enemy, if you can reduce the friction of your own side to a greater extent than the enemy, great advantages can accrue.³⁵⁹ Uncertainty may paralyse one

³⁵⁴ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 117.

³⁵⁵ For instance, Clausewitz explains how it is the element of uncertainty that is a principal reason why war 'eludes the strict requirement that extremes of force be applied' as the logical concept of absolute war implies. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89. Also, uncertainty is presented as one of the reasons why suspensions of military activity in war occurs: due to uncertainty, the commander's evaluation of the situation 'may be mistaken and can lead him to suppose that the initiative lies with the enemy... one must admit that partial ignorance of the situation is, generally speaking, a major factor in delaying the progress of military action', p. 95.

³⁵⁶ Handel, *Masters of War*, p. 82.

³⁵⁷ Harold A. Winters, *Battling the Elements: Weather and Terrain in the Conduct of War* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 9-15.

³⁵⁸ Herbig, 'Chance and Uncertainty', p. 113.

³⁵⁹ Some of the more realistic proponents of information warfare in current thinking see this as a one of the key areas in which new technologies can create comparative advantage.

commander, but it may appear to another as a world full of possibilities within which creative genius can take wing. The same idea was expressed by Thucydides when he stated, 'That imponderable element of the future is the thing which counts in the long run, and, just as we are most frequently deceived by it, so too it can be of the greatest possible use to us.'³⁶⁰ Indeed, Clausewitz himself could not be clear enough on this subject: 'we should not habitually prefer the course that involves the least certainty...There are times when the utmost daring is the height of wisdom.'³⁶¹ Again, this echoes Machiavelli who had a chapter in his *Discourses* entitled, 'Results are often obtained by Impetuosity and Daring which could never have been obtained by Ordinary Methods.'³⁶²

Clausewitz, it appears, was not so concerned with the fact of the existence of chance and probability per se, but rather with the resultant demands it makes on those faced with such reality: what we might call the 'psychological consequences of chronic uncertainty.'³⁶³ His fascination with the creative talents such conditions call forth is revealed when he states that, 'Although our intellect always longs for clarity and certainty, our nature often finds uncertainty fascinating. It prefers to daydream in the realms of chance and luck rather than accompany the intellect on its narrow and tortuous path of philosophical inquiry and logical deduction.'³⁶⁴ War represents the ultimate testing ground of the human creative spirit. Individual soldiers faced with the fear of death or commanders and politicians holding the fate of nations, and potentially thousands of human lives in their hands must make decisions in the midst of relentless uncertainty and crushing responsibility. What greater test can the human will face?

Practical activity and the means of war

Thirdly, and linked to the above point, it is important to note that this tendency encompasses and relates largely, but not exclusively, to practical, goal directed

³⁶⁰ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, p. 301.

³⁶¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 195.

³⁶² Machiavelli, *Discourses*, p. 519.

³⁶³ Herbig, 'Chance and Uncertainty', p. 107.

³⁶⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 97.

activity in war. It may describe a feature of objective reality (the weather, the unpredictable reaction of a population to an intervention), but it does so in relation to what that entails for the active participant in war. Here we are referring to such activity in the very broadest sense; such as the use of various physical and psychological means, political and diplomatic initiatives, strategic decision-making, actual combat, and so on, thus incorporating activity from the lowest tactical to the highest political levels. This tendency is not so much a description of the various means of war, but rather an explanation of the nature of the conditions in which they are applied and the creative human forces that must guide them.³⁶⁵

Strategy itself is at heart a practical activity that seeks to direct resources towards the attainment of certain goals. It is the activity which policy utilises to realise its objects. In this respect, it is a dynamic activity that inevitably takes place in conditions of uncertainty and requires great talent in its execution. Of course, strategy relates to and must take into account all the tendencies of the trinity, but here we want to stress the extent to which it will be conditioned by the inescapable factors associated with this particular tendency. In this respect, it is perhaps not surprising that two modern authors could define strategy as ‘a process, a constant adaptation to shifting conditions and circumstances in a world where chance, uncertainty, and ambiguity dominate.’³⁶⁶ Military tactics are similarly conditioned by these forces, although the nature of their application is different: more direct, immediate, and susceptible to clearer, more definable connections between means and ends.

Reflections

To conclude this chapter, we might consider the analogy of a professional cyclist who attempts to improve performance and overcome friction through new

³⁶⁵ This connection with means is clearly reflected in Chapter 1, Book 1 of *On War* when Clausewitz states, ‘If we now consider briefly the subjective nature of war – the means by which war has to be fought – it will look more than ever like a gamble.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 96.

³⁶⁶ Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, ‘Introduction: On Strategy’, in Murray et al, *The Making of Strategy*, p. 1.

aerodynamic designs and outfits, enhanced training,³⁶⁷ and psychological preparation. Yet, everywhere friction will remain: in the resistance of the air, the road, the parts of the bike, the cyclists' muscles, and even in terms of mental disposition – only so much can be done to reduce these factors. Moreover, the weather might deteriorate, the crowd may be unsupportive, or an unexpected crash may suddenly block the way. Yet, all competitors have to deal with such real and potential difficulties, therefore victory will most likely go to the cyclist who manages to limit the negative effects of friction, prepares rigorously, and deals with or exploits whatever chance events occur on the day of the race. If the analogy is to be even more pertinent to war, then we might note the efforts by some cyclists to cheat by taking performance enhancing drugs or hindering the performance of others by tampering with their bikes.

In war, chance and uncertainty should not be conceived as being everywhere, all of the time – there are observable linear cause and effect relationships, and rational decision-making is also part of war at all levels. However, uncertainty is central to the nature of the phenomenon, along with the measures humans employ to overcome it. Modern developments, such as those associated with high-tech systems or professional institutional intelligence agencies have not rendered these insights obsolete. If anything, this tendency may be even more relevant to the forms of modern warfare which take place in multiple dimensions, often amongst civilian populations, using a mind-boggling mix of old and new technologies, and which are pervaded by endlessly complex political, legal, and ethical dynamics, refracted through omnipresent 24 hour mass media, and involve multiple actors, diverse groups, and complex bureaucracies.³⁶⁸

During the Iraq War of 2003, aside from a few speed-bumps *en route*, Coalition forces – armed with advanced networked technology and precision weapons, and shaped in their application by detailed doctrine, rigorous training exercises, and detailed operational planning – pushed aside what Iraqi opposition barred the advance to Baghdad. Yet, however much these forces managed to dissipate the fog of war at the operational level, unforeseen occurrences at all

³⁶⁷ Indeed, Clausewitz compares the physical power of an army to 'the muscles of an athlete, [that] has been steeled by training in privation and effort.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 220.

³⁶⁸ See Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2005).

levels and in all of war's dimensions would, in the years that followed, render what immediate gains they had achieved almost meaningless. In many respects, they were a victim of their own operational, technical potency, where over-confidence bred arrogance and strategic myopia: too few troops were deployed to contain the violent insurgency that ensued, itself a manifestation of political dynamics ignored by Pentagon planners over-enamoured by technical solutions and blinded by utopian scenarios. The Iraq War underlines the extent to which Clausewitz's analysis of chance and uncertainty as integral to the nature of war still pertains. When war is properly viewed holistically, the scope for chance and uncertainty – within which all relevant actors must operate – is vast, complex, and inescapable. Yet, whilst always there, it must be remembered that it is also always there for the enemy also.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁹ A similar point is made by Gray: 'To succeed in strategy you do not have to be distinguished or even particularly competent. All that is required is performing well enough to beat an enemy. You do not have to win elegantly; you just have to win.' Colin S. Gray, 'Why Strategy Is Difficult', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Summer 1999, p. 12.

CHAPTER SIX

Passion: The Blind Natural Force

...there were the savage and pitiless actions into which men were carried not so much for the sake of gain as because they were swept way into an internecine struggle by their ungovernable passions. Then with the ordinary conventions of civilised life thrown into confusion, human nature, always ready to offend even where the law exists, showed itself proudly in its true colours, as something incapable of controlling passion...¹

Thucydides

In H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* we witness, through the eyes of the shipwrecked Edward Prendick, the attempt to fashion human likenesses from animals through the eponymous doctor's cruel and elaborate vivisection techniques on a remote Pacific Island. Absent the authority held by the 'Sayer of the Law'² following the murder of their master and creator, the 'beast folk' soon begin to revert back to their brutish animal natures. Most ominously, however, upon his safe return to civilisation, Prendick is tormented by an inverted fear that ordinary people may in fact be 'animals half-wrought into the outward image of human souls, and that they would presently begin to revert, to show first this bestial mark and then that', that 'the animal was surging up through them,' and that they were perhaps not fully 'emancipated from instinct.'³ This ingenious anthropomorphic tale serves to impress upon the reader the small biological gap that separates humans from mere beasts. It perhaps demonstrates the potential ease with which humans can revert to the savagery of their nature and expresses a worried doubt about reason's ability to restrain it.⁴

¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 245.

² As physically embodied in the Doctor's subsequently destroyed 'House of Pain'.

³ H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), pp. 182-83.

⁴ But as J. R. Hammond points out, 'Wells rejected the view that man is inherently evil. To him man was only inherently animal' and the 'bestial trait manifested itself in violence and anger, and all education must necessarily be a modification and a sublimation of these primitive elements.' J. R. Hammond, 'Commentary', in *Ibid.*, pp. 199-203.

This tendency is described as being composed of ‘primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind *natural* force.’⁵ In the following paragraph Clausewitz refers back to this element as ‘passion’. Wells’s fable clearly expresses the sort of primitive, atavistic, and animalistic forces suggested by Clausewitz. Humans, being merely animals who have developed the capacity for reason, always retain the potential to display the characteristics deeply embedded in their nature,⁶ whilst that nature, as Wells held, is essentially ambiguous in its manifestation, neither intrinsically good or bad: violent passion is just one of its potential forms. Wells gives us a fictitious glimpse into the consequences of a world in which instinct rules over reason; yet, whilst pure fantasy, the fable reminds us just how fragile, in reality, the power of reason is when the rule of law loses its force, when fear and the necessity of survival predominate, when basic emotions are aroused, and when perceived obstacles to personal gain are removed. That such experiments were attempted in the 1920s in the Soviet Union by Dr Ilya Ivanov (in an attempt conceived by Stalin to create advanced soldiers by cross-breeding humans and apes) – despite their failure – should lead us to question just how far fetched such tales actually are.⁷

These primordial aspects of human nature are conceived as things which neither science nor reason can fully conquer or control. If we imagine a world without such traits evident, or at least potential, in the human species, then we go further than the fictional, yet disturbingly plausible world of Wells’ *Island* and enter the entirely make-believe, the realm of the impossible inhabited by denying anthropomorphophobics.⁸ To postulate a purely rational world inhabited by automatons following the mechanical dictates of reason would fail to capture the reality of war; but, moreover, war is precisely the sort of activity in which such instinctive and deep-seated characteristics have the potential to influence or usurp human behaviour. As Creveld notes, ‘Nothing is more likely than the

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. 101. Emphasis added.

⁶ This was a view held by thinkers such as Seneca and Machiavelli, who both wondered whether men were worse than wild beasts. See Neal Wood, ‘Some Common Aspects of the Thought of Seneca and Machiavelli’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Spring 1968, pp. 11-23, 13, and 19.

⁷ John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 42.

⁸ Anthropomorphobia relates to those who believe humans to be unique or special and deny any common traits with animals.

terror of war to cause rationality to go by the board, nor is anything more conducive to make even the most even-minded start behaving somewhat strangely.’⁹ Likewise, Clausewitz remarks how fighting ‘will stir up hostile feelings...That is only human (or animal, if you like), but it is a fact.’¹⁰ To acknowledge the play of such forces was crucial and warranted inclusion as a clearly defined element of the phenomenon of war.

So, what compelled Clausewitz to incorporate such ideas into his theory, what did he really mean when he spoke of a ‘blind natural force’ or of ‘primordial violence’, does contemporary scholarship and experience support these claims, and how exactly are we to understand the operation of this tendency in reality? As we will see, the answers to these questions are by no means obvious, and grasping Clausewitz’s true meaning requires detailed consideration. This tendency is the one most often neatly side-stepped by commentators, either perhaps because they feel its implications are too obvious or it is seen as too amorphous a concept to adequately capture in scholarly theoretical work. We must attempt to attain a firmer understanding of what is a vital, if complex aspect of war throughout the ages.

Background, influences, and precedents

We will be better placed to present an accurate description of the meaning of this tendency if we are cognisant of some of the influences that contributed to the development of his thought. This tendency is not neatly and conveniently associated with specific aspects of Clausewitz’s intellectual milieu. Rather, we will depict the broad context within which Clausewitz’s ideas germinated, developed, and coalesced in relation to the subject, and yet will not hesitate to emphasise strong connections between a concept and its roots where apparent.

Intellectual influences

We noted in Chapter 2 that Clausewitz’s methodology was heavily indebted to the Enlightenment and the broad standards of scientific and rational enquiry that

⁹ Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), p. 89.

¹⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 159.

it promoted. Yet, where the steady ripples of reason lapped up against the shores of *On War*, so the solid ground of the work truly began to rise out of these calm waters, giving way to a rugged and powerful landscape more in the spirit of Joseph Turner's *Eruption of Vesuvius* or the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge,¹¹ than of rococo formality or neo-classical congruity. In this respect, Clausewitz represents an original page in the history of military thought.¹²

By the end of the eighteenth century an oppositional intellectual movement to the Enlightenment had emerged, which, in broad terms, was critical of the world-view and cultural outlook associated with the 'mechanistic rationality'¹³ of the Enlightenment. This so-called 'Counter-Enlightenment' – or 'the culture of feeling'¹⁴ – would be as, if not more diverse than the movement it was reacting against. Its origins have often been traced back principally to the thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who had resented the marginalisation of 'feeling' due to the 'cold calculation' of Enlightenment reason.¹⁵ Rousseau arguably sowed the seeds of the cultural and intellectual backlash that would find its most striking expression in the output of the German Movement.¹⁶ These thinkers were Clausewitz's contemporaries, many of whom he met, corresponded with, or at least read: their influence on his thought was significant.

Immanuel Kant – whom we know Clausewitz was at least familiar with through his attendance of the lectures of the Kantian populariser, Johann Kiesewetter, whilst at the Berlin War Academy¹⁷ – represented a crucial link between the Enlightenment and the German Movement. Following Kant's refusal to accept the objective existence of the 'thing-in-itself' – the independently existing object – a philosophical tradition emerged in Germany which embraced this demotion of the 'noumenon' and promoted the subjective

¹¹ These poets had been influenced by the German Romantics where the movement first truly took root. Coleridge, for instance, visited Göttingen in 1800.

¹² There was of course the precedent of Berenhorst, but Clausewitz's originality lay in the way he explored the interplay of war's rational and emotional aspects in a scientific manner.

¹³ Michael Howard, *The Invention of Peace and the Reinvention of War* (London: Profile Books, 2001), p. 112.

¹⁴ Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648-1815* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 513.

¹⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789-1848* (St Ives: Abacus, 1999), p. 300.

¹⁶ Russell notes that in Rousseau's novels 'we find wild torrents, fearful precipices, pathless forests, thunder-storms, tempests at sea, and generally what is useless, destructive, and violent.' Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 617-18.

¹⁷ Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 71.

self and its mental faculties.¹⁸ The element of anti-rationalism in Kant's 'critical project' was partly reflected in the influential literature of the men of the *Sturm und Drang*¹⁹ movement in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, whose leading proponents were Hamann, Klinger, Möser, Lavater, and the early Goethe and Schiller.²⁰ As Tim Blanning notes, 'this was very much an angry young man movement against what was perceived as the stultifying rationalism and classicism of the older generation.'²¹

Their writings expressed the rich, vital, and dynamic nature of human reality through the will of acting and charismatic central personalities such as Goethe's *Werther*²² or the characters in Schiller's drama *The Robbers* (for which he was imprisoned) and *Wallenstein*. In their works they extolled extremes of emotion and tormented subjectivity. The freedom, will, consciousness, and wholeness of the self – 'the boundless potential of the human spirit'²³ – was revealed through imaginative and empathetic insights into man as a creative, individualistic, unique, and feeling being. Decrying the mechanistic unfeeling formality of rationalist behaviour, Goethe's *Werther* cries, 'Ah, you sensible people!...Passions! Intoxications! Insanity! You are so calm and collected, so indifferent, you respectable people...passing by like the priest and thanking God like the Pharisee that you are not as other men.'²⁴ Clausewitz, as with much of German society at that time, was swept up in 'Werther-mania.'²⁵ Goethe's *Faust* expresses the desire of the frustrated intellectual to 'leave behind the cerebral

¹⁸ Roger Scrutton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 164.

¹⁹ The movement took its name from a play by Friedrich Maximilian von Klinger of the same title.

²⁰ Herder was also associated with the beginnings of this movement, his work on aesthetics influenced Goethe.

²¹ Blanning, *Pursuit of Glory*, p. 518.

²² Incidentally, Goethe's novel *The Sufferings of Young Werther* was the first international best-seller written by a German. Blanning, *Pursuit of Glory*, p. 519. The title is sometimes alternatively translated as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, such as in the Penguin edition. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (London: Penguin, 1989).

²³ F. J. Lampert, 'Introduction' in Friedrich Schiller, *The Robbers and Wallenstein* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 7.

²⁴ Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, p. 61.

²⁵ As Gat notes, *Werther* was one of the subjects discussed on the occasion of his first meeting with his future wife Marie, Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 184.

world of mere thought and embrace with all his senses the full human lot,²⁶ by making a pact with devil.²⁷

The impact of the radical message contained in these works is unmistakable in Clausewitz's trinity. Moving away from the largely 'dead abstractions',²⁸ of Enlightenment military thought, Clausewitz strove to place living man firmly at the centre of his theory, which would reveal the fundamental subjective forces that permeate war at every level. He notes how, 'Theorists are apt to look on fighting in the abstract as a trial of strength without emotion ever entering into it', when in fact, 'All these and similar effects in the mind and spirit have been proved by experience: they recur constantly, and are therefore entitled to receive their due as objective factors.'²⁹ The authors of the German Movement, and Clausewitz in their train, focused on the real human impulses and motives, in all their variety, that drive men to action – be it superstition, jealousy, ambition, despair, greed, or revenge – rather than an appeal to more noble or strictly rational sentiments.

In Schiller's great drama *The Robbers* we are presented with scenes of energetic vigour and violent passion.³⁰ Franz von Moor, the 'lawless Ego',³¹ revengeful of nature for burdening him with ugliness and jealous of his brother Karl, is driven to his cruel acts based on a justification that, 'might is right, and the limits of strength our only law.'³² In a similar vein, Clausewitz did not shy away from acknowledging these base instincts and the extent that they can come to dominate human behaviour; the ever-present potential for evil in human nature which rejects 'the iron yoke of mechanical laws,'³³ hence necessitating the constant vigilance of would-be victims.

Such themes were developed and taken to their extremes by the German Romantics at around the turn of the century, many of who moved in the same

²⁶ Nicholas Boyle, *German Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 52.

²⁷ 'In tumult of feeling/My mind is riven, my senses reeling./To you I yield, nor care if I am lost./This thing must be, though life should be the cost.' Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part One* (London: Penguin, 1949), p. 47.

²⁸ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 180.

²⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 158.

³⁰ Paret notes that Schiller is the author most often mentioned in Clausewitz's correspondence. Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 84.

³¹ Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, p. 622.

³² Schiller, *The Robbers*, p. 33.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

social circles as Clausewitz.³⁴ The final rejection of neo-classicism, the stress on feelings, sensations, and thoughts, and the elevation of the spiritually free and creative individual, were some of the dominant features of the Romantic poets, dramatists, and philosophers such as the Schlegel brothers and Novalis. Of course, Clausewitz would directly witness such forces in the daring exploits of that great Romantic hero, Napoleon.³⁵ Given the pervasive and deep impact of these writers, and Clausewitz's intimate association with them, it is accurate to assume that the many sections of Clausewitz's work that emphasise emotional and psychological forces owe a great debt to the Romantic outlook. Yet, Paret is certainly correct when he notes how Clausewitz did not follow the Romantics in their surrender to emotion³⁶ and Gat states that it is clear that he rejected both their 'idealism and mysticism.'³⁷

It should also be remembered that not all those whom we might broadly designate as 'Romantic' subscribed to the extreme ideas of the movement, or at least moved away from those extremes in later life, such as was the case with the later Goethe and Schiller. Often such writers were more concerned with the interplay of reason and emotion, rather than with any zero-sum espousal of one over the other. Schiller is of particular interest here. In his more mature works he addressed 'the malaise of modern man, analysing him into his rational and sensuous components' concluding that 'the seeds of rational perception will wither where they fall unless the soil has been prepared by the emotions and imagination.'³⁸ As exemplified in the trinity, it is the complex and dynamic interplay between reason and emotion that fascinated Clausewitz so much, rather than any strict dichotomy between the two.

³⁴ Roger Parkinson, *Clausewitz: A Biography* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), pp. 90-91 and Gat, *Military Thought*, pp. 184-85. Clausewitz met August Wilhelm Schlegel when were both were guests of Madame de Staël in Coppet, Switzerland in 1807. They were often sat at dinner together and Schlegel read to Clausewitz from his works.

³⁵ As Bond states, 'Napoleon embodied the wild, romantic spirit of the early nineteenth century, which contrasted so starkly with the cool and moderate rationalism of the pre-revolutionary era.' Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 42. Clark notes how Beethoven was a great admirer of Napoleon – at least until he proclaimed himself Emperor – and how he amusingly remarked that 'if he knew as much about strategy as he did about counterpoint he would give Napoleon a run for his money.' Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation: A Personal View* (St Ives: John Murray, 2005), p. 215.

³⁶ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 149.

³⁷ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 185.

³⁸ Schiller, *The Robbers*, p. 524.

This interplay is apparent at a broader level in the cultural milieu of Germany at the turn of the century. In the face of new forces at work in Europe, Germans were presented with a dilemma of how to respond and move beyond the restrictive cultural and social structures of the *ancien régime*. Germany was a place beset by contradiction and internal tension. This internal conflict is reflected in the literature and philosophy of the time: the theme of the warring brothers, as depicted in Schiller's *Robbers* perhaps conveys the psychologically torn state of German society at the time between rationalistic self-interested materialism and passionate romantic idealism.³⁹

Indeed, returning to Clausewitz's debt to the Enlightenment, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively we can identify its influence here also. It is, of course, a gross simplification to characterise the Enlightenment as abandoning or marginalising all sensibilities in favour of a cold rationalism, and in fact many of its leading lights, particularly its earlier representatives, were greatly concerned with the place of emotions in their philosophical systems. Moreover, Clausewitz probably owes more to the early Enlightenment than its later more mechanistic, positivistic manifestations, perhaps more than to the wild Romantics mentioned above. In one of his notes to a manuscript on the theory of war written around 1818, Clausewitz acknowledged his debt to Montesquieu, primarily in relation to the style of his presentation. Yet, a deeper affiliation may be posited: as Paret notes, Clausewitz 'must have valued Montesquieu's skepticism, specificity, and recognition of the importance of irrational factors.'⁴⁰

Men such as Adam Smith devoted a great deal of their writings to the study of emotion and sentiment.⁴¹ Smith's famous invisible hand did not operate purely as a result of individual rational calculations, but more due to behaviour governed by instincts and emotions; as John Gray has noted, Smith was 'suspicious of the intellect when it operated without regard for sentiment.'⁴² Such views are inconsistent with classical political economy, just as Clausewitz's conception of war does not correspond with his excessively rationalistic antecedents. Outcomes in war cannot simply be explained by the application of

³⁹ Boyle, *German Literature*, pp. 55-57.

⁴⁰ Peter Paret, *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 137.

⁴¹ Dylan Evans, *Emotion: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Preface.

⁴² Gray, *Black Mass*, p. 87.

purely rational ideas and methods, but must account for the play of emotional, cultural, and individualistic psychological factors that can complement and guide, as well as sometimes divert and usurp the dictates of reason. That Clausewitz held such a view is apparent in his analysis of military genius which he believed embodied a balance between intellect and temperament.

The point of these observations is to suggest that we should perhaps not think of Clausewitz's conception of this tendency as corresponding to the Romantic notion of a strict dichotomy between emotion and reason, whereby the two are fundamentally at odds with one another, but rather as a constant interplay between the two. This insight has three implications worth noting. First, simply because Clausewitz emphasised such emotional forces does not necessarily imply a complete subscription to the Romantic outlook – early enlightenment thinkers were perfectly comfortable with such ideas. Second, the existence of passions in his theory does not necessarily imply a rigid incompatibility with those aspects concerned with the use of reason; the two can, and do compliment each other within individuals or groups, and are not mutually exclusive: policy goals are often shaped by emotions, like ambition or non-rational influences such as religious faith. Third, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, emotion is something which a theory that aims at scientific rigour should not only not ignore, but should actively seek to incorporate.

Events of the day

In addition to the rich vein of cultural and intellectual influences, we can also attribute Clausewitz's emphasis on such forces of passion and hatred in large part to the turbulent events which he lived through and to many of his personal experiences of war in the first thirty-five years of his life. It is first useful to contrast the Napoleonic period which dominated Clausewitz's professional career, with the preceding form of war which he partly experienced in the wars against Revolutionary France. Supposedly reflecting the civilised spirit of the age, eighteenth century European warfare was typified by its generally limited and prudent nature. Most armies approximated to a 'state within a state' in which harsh discipline was upheld to ensure troops could perform the intricate evolutions required of them on the battlefield, withstand enemy fire at point-

blank range, and not flee or desert entirely. In this respect, the emotions of the troops had to be reigned in.⁴³ Churchill quipped that in the wars of that age, ‘bad temper was not often permitted to intrude.’⁴⁴ When Clausewitz went to war in 1793 he did so as part of an army that maintained the formalistic organisation and strict disciplinary codes that had enabled Frederick the Great to achieve repeated successes in his many campaigns. Yet, before long, much of this form of war would be violently swept away.

The storming of the Bastille in France on 14 July 1789 heralded a new era in which the impulses of ‘the people’ began to affect the behaviour of the state as much as the interests of dynastic ‘monarchs, prelates, and aristocrats’⁴⁵ of the old regimes which had dominated Europe throughout the early modern period, whilst this new France threatened the existing norms and status quo of the European system. Furthermore, it was the profound internal state permutations that would be of lasting impact and that was the central impetus behind France’s subsequent behaviour. Europe would soon ensure a return to established principles of diplomacy after the Congress of Vienna, but the popular forces unleashed by the Revolution were irreversible. Clausewitz clearly recognised the importance of these changes and their enormous consequence in the realm of military affairs.

The transfer of sovereignty from the monarch to the nation radically altered the underlying meaning of the monopoly of legitimate violence.⁴⁶ In France, that monopoly became the preserve of the representatives of the so-called ‘Third Estate’ – the voiceless class, the masses, the people – led by men who were fired by an intense belief in the cause of liberty, equality, and fraternity as encapsulated in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*. This republican ideology – realised in practice by September 1792⁴⁷ – placed a premium on people power, democratic sovereignty, and participatory politics,

⁴³ Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Gunther Rothenberg, ‘The Age of Napoleon’, in Michael Howard, George Andreopoulos, and Mark Shulman, (eds.), *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World* (New York: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 86.

⁴⁵ Tim Blanning, ‘Epilogue: The Old Order Transformed 1789-1815’, in Euan Cameron (ed.), *Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 345.

⁴⁶ A concept developed by Max Weber in his *Politics as a Vocation* (1919). Available online at: <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukuma/weber/lecture/politics_vocation.html>, retrieved 6 June 2008.

⁴⁷ The Monarchy was abolished in September 1792 and the new Republic declared, so began Year One of the French Republican calendar.

and instituted a form of governance and citizenship that had been absent, in any meaningful sense, from European politics for centuries.⁴⁸ Even if the benign ideological rhetoric did not match reality in revolutionary France – a fact soon apparent with the onset of the Jacobin Terror led by Robespierre and the subsequent gerrymandering of the ‘Directory’⁴⁹ – this did not change the fact of the social and political transformations that occurred during this period. Despite the shift towards ‘the age of dictatorship,’⁵⁰ which culminated in the crowning of Napoleon Bonaparte as Emperor in 1804 and the concomitant decline of popular sovereignty, it was already patently clear that the age of demagogic politics had arrived. This would have a far-reaching impact on the character of war. As Clausewitz put it, ‘in 1793 a force appeared that beggared all imagination. Suddenly war became the business of the people – a people of thirty millions, all of whom considered themselves to be citizens.’⁵¹

The merging of the ‘three great abstractions’⁵² of state, nation, and people gave rise to forces never witnessed before in European affairs. Supported by the influential thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment,⁵³ the powerful ideology of modern ‘centrifugal nationalism’⁵⁴ was unleashed (which by 1871 had fundamentally reshaped the territorial boundaries of Europe). It was Napoleon’s ability to draw upon and exploit these new passions that largely explains his remarkable military successes in the first decade of the nineteenth century (rather than any decisive new weaponry). He managed to channel patriotic fervour amongst the people into the cult of his own person, so that eventually the two became indistinguishable: the future of France and the Revolution rested upon the continued successes of the Emperor. The people of France had a new found stake in war.

⁴⁸ It is perhaps interesting to note that, despite the impact of the political ideology of republicanism, by 1900 only France, Switzerland, and San Marino had established republics in Europe. J. M. Roberts, *The Penguin History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 57.

⁴⁹ Blanning, ‘Epilogue’, p. 359.

⁵⁰ Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France – Volume II: 1799-1871* (London: Penguin, 1965).

⁵¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 715.

⁵² Blanning, ‘Epilogue’, p. 372.

⁵³ Howard, *Reinvention of War*, pp. 35-40. However, Romantics such as Wordsworth and Goethe, who initially supported the Revolution and what it stood for, later abandoned it in disillusion as it descended into bloodshed, repression, and dictatorship. Clark, *Civilisation*, p. 214.

⁵⁴ Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 161.

This popular political culture had dramatic effects on the intensity and magnitude of warfare. One might empathise with those Frenchmen, stirred by the Romantic spirit of the age championing individual freedom and emboldened by the blood-curdling strains of the 'Marseillaise', who rushed to the defence of *la patrie en danger*, 'fighting as free men to defend freedom.'⁵⁵ As Keegan has noted, military service became intimately associated with the core values of the Revolution (liberty, equality, and fraternity) in the sense that conscription was universal regardless of class, it forged bonds of brotherhood between the young soldiers of Europe, and where the old armies had been instruments of oppression the new ones would be instruments of the people's liberation from kings.⁵⁶

These citizens-in-arms, hastily assembled to defend the revolution, were injected with a sense of enthusiasm, commitment, vigour, and 'high pitched morale'⁵⁷ almost entirely absent from the professional, and largely hired armies, which were the dynastic instruments of the old regime. What the revolutionary armies lacked in professionalism and skill they made up for in the vigour of necessity.⁵⁸ Although nationalism was by no means a new concept before 1789 it had meant little to the masses who were more concerned with eking out an existence within their locality, their *pays*.⁵⁹ After the Revolution, it became evident to these increasingly politicised people that their new-found freedoms and rights, however real, depended crucially upon the survival of the nation. Thus, the Republic – the embodiment of Rousseau's vision of the General Will⁶⁰ – gave birth to an army of patriots willing to take risks and sacrifice themselves for the common good: the individual's own interest became almost synonymous with the Republic's.⁶¹ Such powerful national sentiments were only intensified

⁵⁵ Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 79.

⁵⁶ John Keegan, *The Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1997), pp. 11-13.

⁵⁷ Rapoport, 'Introduction', in Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham and ed. F. N. Maude, (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 21.

⁵⁸ As Howard makes clear, although the ranks were not trained or disciplined, many of the officers were professionals drawn from the lower ranks of the *ancien régime*: herein lies the secret of their success. Howard, *War in European History*, pp. 79-80. See also Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 502.

⁵⁹ Howard makes the point that at this time the mass of inhabitants in Europe, and France in particular, did not consider themselves to be members of a nation, let alone, European – their main concern was with their region, district and village. Howard, *Causes*, p. 159.

⁶⁰ David Boucher, *Political Theories of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 291-92.

⁶¹ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London: Fontana Press, 1989), p. 158.

by the leadership of Napoleon who, in the classical tradition,⁶² emphasised the glory of France as he roused his troops for war. Through mass conscription and war the men of France were 'turned into *Frenchmen*.'⁶³

These were historically unprecedented times in which military expansion rode on the crest of the wave of popular enthusiasm. As Clausewitz observed,

The revolutionary methods of the French had attacked the traditional ways of warfare like acid; they had freed the terrible element of war from its ancient diplomatic and economic bonds. Now war stepped forth in all its raw violence, dragging along an immense accumulation of power; and nothing met the eye but the ruins of the traditional art of war on the one hand, and incredible successes on the other.⁶⁴

When Clausewitz refers to the people's new found interest in war, it is not in some indirect sense such as 'public opinion', but largely in terms of their direct experience in battle through the imposition of universal mass conscription (also, according to the new law, all civilians were to contribute to the war effort in terms of arms, provisions, equipment and so forth).⁶⁵ In Clausewitz's words, 'war was returned to the people.'⁶⁶ Later, and largely in reaction to the 'danger that France posed to everyone'⁶⁷ the peoples' involvement in war was further increased throughout Europe in the form of armed liberation movements, as famously embodied in the Spanish War, but also in the Tyrolean rebellion after 1809, the actions of Cossacks against Napoleon's retreat from Russia, and the

⁶² Napoleon was a great admirer of the ancient world, in particular those great conquerors such as Caesar and Alexander. Cobban, *Modern France*, p. 18. Keegan describes Napoleon as a 'devotee of the Alexander epic.' John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 14.

⁶³ Howard, *Causes*, p. 160.

⁶⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, 'On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst', in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 102.

⁶⁵ 'From this moment until such time as its enemies shall have been driven from the soil of the Republic, all Frenchmen are in permanent requisition for the services of the armies. The young men shall fight; the married men shall forge arms and transport provisions; the women shall make tents and clothes and shall serve in the hospitals; the children shall turn linen into lint; the old men shall betake themselves to the public squares in order to arouse the courage of the warriors and preach hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic.' Internet Modern History Source Book, 'The *Levée en Masse*, Augsut 23, 1793'. Available online at: <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1793levee.html>>, retrieved 4 October 2007.

⁶⁶ Clausewitz, 'On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst', p. 102.

⁶⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 717.

extensive civilian forces mobilised to form the Prussian *Landwehr* from March 1813.⁶⁸

Given the incredible brutality of these ‘people’s wars’, as Gray states, ‘Not for nothing did Clausewitz...associate violence and passion most closely with ‘the people’.⁶⁹ These developments certainly allowed him to perceive the extent to which passion (embodied in militant nationalism or republican ideology) can fundamentally transform both politics and warfare. This, as discussed further below, was clearly only one possible – albeit perhaps the most potent – way in which passion materialises in war, and quite understandably came to dominate his thinking on the subject. Without Clausewitz’s exposure and acute observation of these forces as manifested in the Revolutionary era, it has to be doubted whether he would have fully incorporated these ideas into his theory or invested them with the importance that he did.

Clausewitz’s personal experiences

It remains to briefly note that not only was Clausewitz acutely aware of these new passions that had been unleashed across Europe in a historical sense, but on a number of occasions he came face to face with them, indeed personally lived them, in all their bloody and dramatic reality. Many of the passages concerned with such emotional factors convey a powerfully subjective element, almost as if the author is re-living such events. In the Chapter on ‘Danger in War’, in which Clausewitz takes us on a journey with a soldier cautiously entering into the thick of battle, there can be little doubt that the soldier is Clausewitz, perhaps recounting his first taste of war as a young teenager against the Revolutionary armies.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ We should also include here the earlier counterrevolutionary rising of the Royalists of *La Vendée* against the Republic in 1793 in reaction to the increased persecution of the Clergy in what was an intensely Catholic region and the National Convention’s decision in February to conscript 300,000 men into the army.

⁶⁹ Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 246.

⁷⁰ ‘As we approach the rumble of guns grows louder...shots begin to strike close around us...cannonballs and bursting shells are frequent, and life begins to seem more serious...a shell falls among the staff...you yourself are not as steady and collected as you were...we enter the battle raging before us...shot is falling like hail, and the thunder of our guns adds to the din...the air is filled with hissing bullets that sound like a sharp crack if they pass close to one’s head...the sight of men being killed and mutilated moves our pounding hearts to awe and pity.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 132.

Moreover, Clausewitz himself was stirred by such emotions, or what in *On War* he termed ‘hostile feelings.’ He was, at certain times in his career, enthused with a violent and energetic patriotism, which almost threatened to usurp the calm and measured side of his personality. Whilst in exile, in 1807 he wrote to Marie that ‘no one on earth feels a greater need for national honor and dignity than I do’ and as regards Germany, ‘with whips I would stir the lazy animal and teach it to burst the chains with which out of cowardice and fear it permitted itself to be bound.’⁷¹ Such sentiments are also forcefully revealed in his political testament of 1812 – after Fredrick William had signed what Clausewitz believed to be a humiliating and dangerous treaty with Napoleon⁷² – in which he states that he would consider himself ‘lucky to die gloriously in a noble struggle for the freedom and dignity of the fatherland.’⁷³

Clausewitz certainly understood, directly and personally, the way in which war can induce feelings of patriotic fervour, group belonging, and intense enmity towards others: his life-long hatred of the French – magnified after the humiliation of 1806, his internment in France, and his being witness to the pitiful state Prussia had been reduced to prior to 1813 – is testament to this.⁷⁴ In his essay on ‘The Germans and the French’, perhaps restraining himself somewhat, Clausewitz writes: ‘I will say nothing here of the well-known frivolity and facetiousness of the French.’⁷⁵ However much of a rational scholar and detached intellectual he was, Clausewitz was certainly not personally immune to irrational hatreds and impulsive behaviour.⁷⁶

⁷¹ The letter continues: ‘I would spread an attitude throughout Germany, which like an antidote would eliminate with destructive force the plague that is threatening to decay the spirit of the nation.’ Quoted in Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 129.

⁷² Napoleon required Prussia’s acquiescence and support for his Russian Campaign in order to secure his long and vulnerable lines of communication.

⁷³ Carl von Clausewitz, ‘Political Declaration’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 291.

⁷⁴ Parkinson, *Clausewitz*, p. 26. Heuser notes this may also have derived from his wife’s influence, whose English mother was swept up in the fervour of hatred toward the French. Beatrice Heuser, *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 2.

⁷⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, ‘The Germans and French’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 255.

⁷⁶ He also expressed a strong hatred of Jews, although the evidence is slim. This seemed to be primarily manifested in a general sense as he could be on close personal terms with assimilated Jews. In perhaps one of his most controversial and ugliest passages – particularly in the light of subsequent German history – in a letter of 1812 he wrote: ‘The whole existence of the Poles is as though bound and held together by torn ropes and rags. Dirty German Jews, swarming like vermin in the dirt and misery, are the patricians of this land. A thousand times I thought if only fire would destroy this whole anthill so that this unending filth were changed by the clean flame into clean ashes.’ Quoted in Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 212.

Explorations

Of Clausewitz's three tendencies, this one of passion is perhaps the most intellectually awkward to swallow: to those from supposedly 'enlightened' or 'civilised' states, it clashes with norms of military behaviour, perceptions of self-righteousness, and a progressive belief in the triumph of reason over the passions, in particular violent passion or innate tribalism. Indeed, Coker has argued that this is how Western warriors have distinguished themselves from others: 'War was the business of 'civil' people not enslaved to their passions or pursuing their enemies out of revenge. Western warriors were rational.'⁷⁷ Whilst believing that less civilised states, armed groups, rebel factions, or terrorists in other parts of the world are often more in the thrall of aggressive emotion or primal hatred when they go to war, they claim to do so with a clear head, for reasons of state interest, and led by the cold calculation of the mind, not the hot blooded command of the heart.

This tendency of the trinity, they might argue, no longer applies to them – war is a rational activity undertaken by responsible leaders elected by a well-informed public – and whilst chance may still apply, passion has been controlled by universal education and the authority of the intellect. This was a view reinforced during the early phases of the Cold War when strategies for potential nuclear war were reduced to statistical metrics and mathematical, 'economic conflict' models.⁷⁸ Perhaps because the emotional strains of 'thinking about the unthinkable' would be too much for any sane individual to face, the human consequences had to be converted into cold euphemisms such as 'city avoidance'.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Western depictions of brutal conflicts in the Balkans,

⁷⁷ Christopher Coker, *Waging War Without Warriors? The Changing Culture of Military Conflict* (London: Lynne Reiner, 2002), p. 107.

⁷⁸ Colin S. Gray, 'What RAND Hath Wrought', *Foreign Policy*, No. 4, Autumn 1971, p. 111. This is not to argue that such strategists should have been led by their hearts rather than their minds in approaching their subject, but rather that the content of their studies was undermined by being largely restricted to what could be rationally analysed according to statistical models. Nevertheless, as Bull suggests 'they at least charted some reasonable course where otherwise there may well have been only drift.' See Hedley Bull, 'Strategic Studies and its Critics', *World Politics*, Vol. 20, No. 4, July 1968, pp. 597 and 605.

⁷⁹ As developed under the tenure of Secretary of Defence, Robert S. McNamara. Under McNamara, an array of civilian strategists, many from RAND, constructed 'scientific' theories based on assumptions of rationality and an abstract 'homo strategicus'. From such thinking – based greatly on ideas of bargaining – came the notion of city-avoidance: the idea that the US would not at first attack Soviet cities but would hold the prospect in reserve as a bargaining chip

Africa, and other parts of the Third World are often explained away as simply the ‘atavistic eruptions of...incurable tribalism’, the actions of savages fired by ancient hatreds, who, because of their backward social conditions, are unable to conduct war with the restraint shown by Western states. As Martin Smith argues, the concentration on the irrational in these wars represents more ‘a means to explain away the essential unwillingness to go through the laborious task of understanding such wars.’⁸⁰ This is not to argue that such deep-seated hatreds are not present,⁸¹ just that a crude rendering shrouds the political contexts and logic of such wars, whilst setting up unjustified and haughty notions of Western superiority.

A closer examination of such modern wars reveals the continued workings of rational and strategic behaviour, even where gross crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and barbaric acts take place. Sadly, such awful acts often stem precisely from the political logic of such wars. It is the nature of the political issues – such as power struggles shaped by ethnic identity – over which those wars are fought that provides them with much of their brutal character, not a mere return to barbarism and primordial hatreds. It is more an inability on the part of Western analysts, due to ethnocentric blinkers, to deduce the rationales behind such actions. This lack of understanding might be deemed surprising given that during World War II, the strategic bombing of whole cities, which was bound to result in thousands of civilian deaths, was conducted for coldly rational strategic reasons by supposedly civilised states. Thus, it appears that the description of massacres and other horrific acts in the Balkans, Africa, and Asia as primal and savage stems from racial stereotyping and a lack of empathy.

As we will see, Clausewitz believed war waged by ‘civilised’ societies may show more signs of being controlled by intellect,⁸² but that that they were just as capable as being infused with irrational impulses. Clausewitz clearly rejected the myopic ‘progressive’ Enlightenment perspective. As noted in

in order to seek to terminate the war. See Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 231.

⁸⁰ M. L. R. Smith, ‘Strategy in an age of low-intensity warfare’, in Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Jan Angstrom (eds.), *Rethinking the Nature of War* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 51.

⁸¹ Gray describes the beastliness of the 1990s as ‘in-the-face personally primitive and postmodern. Chechnya, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia comprised a ghastly combination of Homer and Tom Clancy.’ Colin Gray, ‘Clausewitz rules, OK? The future is the past – with GPS’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, 1999, p. 168.

⁸² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 85.

Chapter 4, many of Clausewitz's detractors – and even some of his proponents – have interpreted him as the prophet of the complete reverse of that sentiment.⁸³ These problems make it clear that we require a deeper understanding, not only of what Clausewitz did have to say on this subject, but of the meaning intended, and why he felt it was such an integral factor for it to be included as a key concept in his theory.

Clausewitz on passion

Handel comments that, 'Clausewitz was perhaps the first major strategist to give full recognition to the influence of non-rational elements on warfare.'⁸⁴ References to the emotional aspects of war occur frequently throughout *On War* and in much of Clausewitz's other work. Indeed, when contrasted with the generally dry, scientific, technical, and anodyne nature of Enlightenment military thinkers⁸⁵ the originality is stark.⁸⁶ At one point, Clausewitz remarks that 'in the dreadful presence of suffering and danger, emotion can easily overwhelm intellectual conviction.'⁸⁷ Clausewitz refers to a soldier whose heart is moved to 'awe and pity' by the terrible things he sees in battle and that he cannot pass through the 'layers of increasing intensity of danger without sensing that here ideas are governed by other factors, that the light of reason is refracted in a manner quite different from that which is normal in academic speculation.'⁸⁸

⁸³ For instance, Booth takes it for granted that Clausewitz is largely responsible for establishing a 'rational policy model' in strategic thinking. When Booth states, in an apparent swipe at Clausewitz, that war 'may sometimes be everything but a continuation of political intelligence. The reasons men and groups engage in war are complex,' he is in fact expressing a distinctly Clausewitzian assertion. His representation of Clausewitz appears to stem almost solely from Clausewitz's famous aphorism of war as a continuation of politics and Anatol Rapoport's subsequent crude and one-sided rendering of it. Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 74.

⁸⁴ Michael I. Handel, *War, Strategy and Intelligence* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 15.

⁸⁵ Bülow and Jomini stand out in this respect.

⁸⁶ Beyond his strictly theoretical and historical studies, it is evident that Clausewitz's was a deeply passionate character, however shy and reserved he may have been in public. This emotional side is conveyed in his heartfelt and quasi-poetic letters to Marie, not only in relation to his love for her, but for his intense feelings with respect to war. However, perhaps the strongest evidence of such emotion is displayed in his 'Political Declaration' of 1812 in which he states: 'I have allowed myself to open my heart...to say things in the language of passion that only the passions can and should say.' Clausewitz, 'Political Declaration', p. 291.

⁸⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 125.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 132-33. It is perhaps insightful to compare Clausewitz's description of approaching battle with an Egyptian account quoted by Dyer: 'You determine to go forward, though you don't know the way. Shuddering seizes you, the hair of your head stands on end, your soul lies on your hand....The ravine is on one side of you, the mountain rises on the other. On you go, and guide

Whilst such passages certainly add to the gripping and powerful character of much of the prose (a point often overlooked in relation to Clausewitz's work), the inclusion of such imagery was intended less for aesthetic effect than for the higher purpose of analytical and theoretical precision. Clausewitz was certainly no romantic poet⁸⁹ and he was not even writing for public acclaim in his lifetime, but rather for personal intellectual fulfilment and lasting influence.⁹⁰

The inclusion of such imagery and drama might appear to be the personal sensibilities of a passionate soldier creeping into his supposedly sober objective analysis, thus throwing into question its scientific credentials. Yet, as we observed in Chapter 2, quite the contrary is true. His inclusion of emotional factors in theory was, he believed, essential for any 'scientific' treatment of the subject – such factors were for him inescapable elements of the reality of war, not mere side-effects or aspects that the rational observer must see past in order to get to the root of the subject, nor elements belonging to some other transcendent realm as some previous thinkers had held.

The references to the kinds of phenomena associated with passion and irrationalism appear in different contexts throughout Clausewitz's work, sometimes with varying meanings, and utilised for differing illustrative or conceptual purposes. This makes separation of these ideas a difficult task for the student of Clausewitz. The idea is closely associated with, indeed an element of what Clausewitz terms 'moral forces' or 'spiritual factors' (existing in the 'sphere of the mind and spirit'), but not exactly coterminous with them; moral forces have a broader application and extend to subjects not properly considered in the context of this tendency, such as courage or the psychology of the commander. Emotion is of course powerfully associated with forms of morale in the sense that, for instance, hatred of the enemy can greatly inspire armies to fight with greater enthusiasm. Yet morale is certainly dependent on factors other

your chariot beside you, and fear that the chariot will fall...The sky is open, and you imagine that the enemy is behind you.' Gwynne Dyer, *War: The Lethal Custom* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005), p. 150.

⁸⁹ Mike Smith notes how some commentators in US military institutions believe *On War* should be taught as poetry. Smith, 'low-intensity warfare', p. 39.

⁹⁰ This point is made forcibly by Marie in her preface to *On War*, when she states that 'To complete his works was his dearest wish, but it was not his intention to communicate it to the world during his lifetime' and that 'no vain desire for praise and recognition, no trace of egoistic motive mingled with this noble urge for great and lasting influence.' 'Preface by Marie von Clausewitz to the Posthumous Edition of Her Husband's Works, Including *On War*', in Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 73-75.

than feelings of enmity towards the enemy, such as the nature of the political purpose of the war or the extent of trust in the commander. Morale is a collective psychological state, but as a total concept it is not ideally explained or defined by emotion alone.

These points are intended to emphasise the extent to which it is more or less futile to analytically separate elements of passion from other important subjects which it feeds into and complements, but which are best covered in other sections of this study. Nevertheless, a close examination yields a fairly clear picture of what Clausewitz was intending to convey. Such an analysis will provide us with the foundations to consider the ways in which Clausewitz's ideas may be developed in the light of modern experience and scholarship.

A blind natural force? The human condition

Clausewitz's basic justification for inclusion of this tendency as a distinct element of war appears to derive from a belief that it is an inherent element of human nature: he describes it as a 'blind natural force' and elsewhere as 'innate' or 'primordial'. The inference is that human nature is somehow prone to aggressive passions and that these are often expressed at a social level in war. How valid is such an assertion? Can we talk of an instinctive human proclivity towards violence and aggression? If so, then how and why? If not, then we may conclude the inclusion of this tendency in Clausewitz's theoretical framework is questionable or perhaps overstated. There are a number of potential perspectives that can shed light on these questions. Indeed, it is an issue that taps in to some long running debates that cross modern disciplinary divides. Some of the greatest political philosophers, psychologists, and scientists have grappled with the subject of man's innate potential for violence. The classic presentation is to be found in the contrasting philosophical systems of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes. If we follow Rousseau in his *A Discourse on Inequality* then we are perhaps mistaken in assuming a blind natural impulse towards violent aggression, and should rather conceive of the pacific, free and equal 'noble savage' who is corrupted by artificial culture, habits, and institutions.⁹¹ Hobbes presents us with an alternative conception of humans in a state of nature, where

⁹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality* (London: Penguin, 1984).

notions of justice, equity, modesty, and mercy themselves, 'without the terror of some Power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our naturall Passions, that carry us to Partiality, Pride, Revenge, and the like' and where man is 'in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man.'⁹²

The fundamental contrast in philosophical perspectives characterised by Rousseau and Hobbes can be recognised in more recent analyses. Keegan, in his *A History of Warfare*, begins his discussion by asking the question: 'is man violent by nature or is his potentiality for violence...translated into use by the operation of material factors?'⁹³ The divide between naturalists and materialists that Keegan highlights is one that closely resembles the classic philosophical debate. After considering briefly the evidence from both neurology and genetics, Keegan argues that 'the opponents and proponents of the thesis that 'man is naturally aggressive' both pitch their case too strong.'⁹⁴ Aggression, he asserts, is certainly part of man's genetic inheritance, but this aggressiveness is moderated by the influence of other parts of the brain and the calculation of risk in specific circumstances. Keegan also notes that science sheds little light on how these insights apply to the phenomenon of group violence.

More nuanced and detailed arguments, but comparable in their conclusions, are presented by Gat in his *War in Human Civilisation*⁹⁵ and Gwynne Dyer in his *War: The Lethal Custom*.⁹⁶ In his multidisciplinary study, Gat incorporates many of the arguments that Keegan alludes to but in a more systematic fashion and firmly held together by the thread of evolutionary theory as a 'comprehensive interpretative framework.'⁹⁷ After reviewing the ethological, archaeological, and anthropological evidence, Gat concludes that violent conflict was indeed a feature of the evolutionary human state of nature.⁹⁸ Similarly Dyer notes that the 'lives of our prehistoric ancestors were utterly immersed in war.'⁹⁹ These findings, that simple hunter-gatherers fought and

⁹² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 223 and 185.

⁹³ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 79.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 83.

⁹⁵ Gat, *Civilisation*.

⁹⁶ Dyer, *Lethal Custom*.

⁹⁷ Gat, *Civilisation*, p. 142.

⁹⁸ The period of human existence prior to the development of agriculture.

⁹⁹ Dyer, *Lethal Custom*, p. 94.

with significant casualties,¹⁰⁰ certainly appears to contradict the Rousseauite position of warfare as a later cultural ‘invention.’¹⁰¹ But, more important is the question of why this was so?

Gat offers a plausible and persuasive explanation that centres around the notion that aggression is best understood as a tactic – and only one among many – for the achievement of primary biological ends. It is an *innate* yet optional tactic.¹⁰² It is innate because of the powerful pressure of selection over many millennia. It is optional because its use is dependent on the ‘continuous intuitive assessment of the chances and risks, stakes and alternatives.’¹⁰³ On such a reading, the ‘culturalists’ of the 1960s and 1970s were misguided in attempting to search for entirely peaceful hunter-gatherer societies because the fact that a society does not fight is not sufficient evidence that warfare is a cultural invention, but rather is a function of conditions which mitigate against the use of the aggressive tactic (such as the plentiful supply of resources).

Gat argues that the potentiality for aggression is biologically hardwired in humans in order that the basic evolutionary needs of survival and reproductive success can be realised in a world typified by scarcity and competition. Yet, in societies where these needs are adequately fulfilled there is no reason why humans cannot live in peace.¹⁰⁴ Warfare in early hunter-gatherer societies was principally conducted between relatively small kin-groups held together by shared cultures and it is this sentiment of kin solidarity that lies behind modern notions of patriotism and nationalism, as shared-culture groups have expanded beyond their original genetic/regional groupings.¹⁰⁵ It is useful here to conclude with a sentence that neatly summarises Gat’s argument: ‘Although violence is evoked, and suppressed, by powerful emotional stimuli...it is not a primary, ‘irresistible’ drive; it is highly tuned, both innate and optional, evolution-shaped tactics, turned on and off in response to changes in the calculus of survival and reproduction.’¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ Gat, *Civilisation*, p. 16.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Not only do Gat's and Dyer's conclusions provide us with convincing evidence as to the innate aggressive element in humans, but moreover, these insights are distinctly Clausewitzian in the sense that war is presented as not just the expression of an emotional instinct which can explain seemingly irrational eruptions of violence, but is also as dependent on reasoned calculations of risk and benefit specific to prevailing circumstances. Violent passion is expressed by Clausewitz in a similar fashion – a force that is sometimes necessary to inculcate in groups to improve fighting performance in war. This idea of a constant and complex interaction between reason and emotion in conditions of uncertainty is firmly implied in the trinity.

These observations give credence to a discussion that Clausewitz develops in the opening sections of *On War*. Clausewitz wants to make clear that hostile feelings exist regardless of any supposed level of civilisation a society may have reached, and this seems to be based firmly on his belief that such emotions are deep-rooted in the human condition. 'Savage people' Clausewitz notes 'are ruled by passion, civilised people by the mind'¹⁰⁷ but, crucially, 'even among educated peoples and civilised societies men are often swept away by passion, just as in the Middle Ages poachers chained to stags were carried off into the forest.'¹⁰⁸ Civilised peoples are just as susceptible to these forces as are savages, and the extent of their influence will depend on such factors as the importance of the 'conflicting interests' and 'on how long their conflict lasts.'¹⁰⁹ Hostile feelings – 'the principle of enmity as embodied in its agent, man, and in all that goes to make up warfare'¹¹⁰ – can vary significantly and the level of hostility exists irrespective of the level of civilisation.

Reason and civilisation may limit some of the excesses in war – if 'civilised nations do not put their prisoners to death or devastate cities and countries, it is because intelligence plays a larger part in their methods of warfare and has taught them more effective ways of using force'¹¹¹ – but they are by no means obstacles to the extreme use of force, which is logically valid regardless of the character of the actors: 'The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible

¹⁰⁷ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 84.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 700.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

with the simultaneous use of the intellect.’¹¹² There may indeed be factors – social norms and conditions – that mitigate some of the worst excesses, but it would be foolish to believe that such states were immune to the escalatory logic of violence or to their capture by passions and hatreds, which even if not initially present, will inevitably be evoked by the experience of war itself. The total wars of the twentieth century stand testament to the enduring validity of these observations. Civilisation, Enlightenment, and social refinement cannot radically alter the basic human condition. Robert Kaplan has even suggested that it is precisely modern taboos against violence, ‘imposed by civilisation that can make hatred feel at times like a renewal of virility.’¹¹³

Individual and collective passions

At the level of personal experiences in war this tendency is perhaps fairly uncontroversial and clear in its meaning. A glance through military diaries from any age will confirm this. Keegan emphasises the importance of these ‘sensations and emotions’ and how they constitute a ‘powerful...part of every human being’s make-up and [are] likely therefore, even when artificially stimulated, to affect the novice officer’s composure to an abnormal and exaggerated extent. ...They touch too upon some of man’s most violent passions; hatred, rage and the urge to kill.’¹¹⁴ They are permanent and universal: as Michael Dockrill makes clear, the missiles have become much more accurate and protective measures...are more sophisticated, but the human frame has not changed. The feelings and emotions of those exposed to firepower, whether as civilians and combatants, have remained constant throughout history.’¹¹⁵ Dyer quotes a World War II veteran who described the psychology of troops in battle: ‘No man in battle is really sane. The mindset of the soldier on the battlefield is a highly disturbed mind, and this is an epidemic of insanity which affects

¹¹² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 84.

¹¹³ Robert D. Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), p. 50.

¹¹⁴ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 18.

¹¹⁵ Michael Dockrill, ‘The Experience of War’, in Lawrence Freedman (ed.), *War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 9.

everybody there.’¹¹⁶ The latter point alerts us to a further issue we must consider.

Whilst an individualistic conception of emotion is important to our understanding of this tendency, for Clausewitz the forces described are presented less as personal than as collective or social phenomena. For instance, he explains how ‘even the most civilised of *peoples*...can be fired with a passionate hatred for each other.’¹¹⁷ Note that the term he employs is ‘peoples,’ not people in the singular. The types of forces described are often referred to as the ‘mood of the nation’ or what Hugh Smith terms popular feelings and animosities.¹¹⁸ Clausewitz refers to them as being akin to the ‘temper of the population’¹¹⁹ – the emotions of the masses,¹²⁰ peoples, and populations. There is certainly a difference between emotions expressed at the personal level to those understood at the group level, other than the latter constituting a mere aggregation of individual emotions, whilst there are of course definite connections between the two. Was Clausewitz correct to write of such *collective* passions and, if so, how exactly are they to be conceived?

To clarify the point, let us consider a Nazi Party mass rally in the 1930s. Through forceful, energetic, and searing rhetoric Hitler tapped into vague individual sentiments of humiliation, desperation, and lingering animosities and elevated them to the level of distinct, burning, almost all-consuming hatreds in millions of German citizens. People present at such rallies attest to the hypnotising impact of the event. Indeed, Hermann Rauschning, recounted how Hitler proclaimed to him that ‘the masses are like an animal that obeys its instincts. They do not reach their instincts by reasoning... At a mass meeting, thought is eliminated.’¹²¹ Ehrenreich quotes a British psychologists who noted that at Nazi rallies, the people present ‘become fused into a not very intelligent but immensely powerful monster...with no judgement and few, but very violent passions...The monster became self-conscious of its size and intoxicated by the

¹¹⁶ Dyer, *Lethal Custom*, p. 103. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ Hugh Smith, *On Clausewitz* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 120.

¹¹⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 216.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹²¹ Hermann Rauschning, *The Voice of Destruction: Conversations with Hitler, 1940* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), pp. 210-11.

belief in its own omnipotence.’¹²² The result of such collective emotion is something more infinite and all-pervasive than simply the aggregate of each individual’s feelings, the resulting whole of which is perhaps felt by each and outlasts the particular moment. It is something more powerful and real, yet simultaneously vaporous and elusive to the observer.

Mass consciousness is dimly perceived but impossibly abstract, perhaps somewhat akin to Benedict Anderson’s notion of ‘imagined communities.’¹²³ It is a shifting, morphing force, the presence of which may be sensed, but is only truly realised through symbolic action or public expressions of violence, like a rain cloud made up of millions of tiny droplets blown along together and shaped by the wind, which appears to exist as some form of whole, but only reveals its true nature and manifests itself as concrete reality when its collective density reaches such a level that it results in a sudden downpour or a flash of lightening. In fact Clausewitz evokes similar imagery in respect to a people’s uprising against occupation, where, if it is to be successful, based on the generalised desire to drive out the enemy, ‘the fog must thicken and form a dark and menacing cloud out of which a bolt of lightening may strike at any time.’¹²⁴

The point of this example is to reveal the way in which collective feelings can exist as a kind of independent force, both dependent on the individuals who brought them into being, and affecting them in turn. They can be deliberately inculcated by politicians or emerge spontaneously in response to certain events and longer-term developments. The use of the example of a mass rally is at once instrumental – to simply clarify some of the operative forces – but also a highly pertinent instance of the extremes collective passions can reach. Indeed, many people attest to the great power of ‘the crowd’ and how it can induce emotions that otherwise would not exist. Ehrenreich notes how the crowd ‘leaves mundane things behind and transmutes itself into a new kind of being, larger than the sum of its parts, more powerful than any single individual’¹²⁵ and Clark comments how ‘Communal enthusiasm may be a dangerous intoxicant.’¹²⁶

¹²² Roger E. Money Kyrle quoted in Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites: A History of Passion in War* (St Ives: Virago, 1998), pp. 16-17.

¹²³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006).

¹²⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 581.

¹²⁵ Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites*, p. 16.

¹²⁶ Clark, *Civilisation*, p. 214.

The concept is however temporally and spatially flexible and can relate to the sense of brotherhood and shared sacrifice felt by a small terrorist organisation or extend to the general sentiments of an entire nation, or perhaps, in this global age, of enormous supra-national agglomerations in the loose sense of people with shared interests and concerns, however geographically dispersed (indeed, it is important not to lose sight of the spatial and temporal possibilities this concept allows). Additionally, it must be added that such a collective concept can only refer to a generalised aggregate, the dominating characteristics of the whole, which will be composed of a vast range of individual, and sometimes conflicting emotions upon closer inspection. For instance, the enthusiasms for war displayed in August 1914 were not shared by all, nevertheless it is the scope of the enthusiasm that was historically important.¹²⁷ As Howard attests in relation to such emotional forces during World War I, 'trends like these are difficult and sometimes impossible to document, but no study of the war can be complete which does not take them into account.'¹²⁸

To summarise, this tendency certainly embodies collective passions as well as the more personal emotions we commonly associate with war, which as we have seen are both innate and evinced in history. Collective passions are dependent upon, inflame, yet transcend individual feelings of animosity and can lead individuals to such a pitch of emotion that they lose all grounding in reason, as Clausewitz himself experienced at certain intense moments of his life. The individual and collective aspects of this tendency are thus both crucially important.

Passion and the use of force

We have briefly noted how Clausewitz strongly identifies this tendency of violent emotions with the actual physical use of force, although we should be careful not to confuse the two. Here, Clausewitz is concerned with violence as a *motive force* not in the physical use of the term.¹²⁹ Yet, the former is inescapably

¹²⁷ Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 101.

¹²⁸ Michael Howard, *Studies in War and Peace* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), pp. 103-04.

¹²⁹ A point made by Christopher Bassford, 'The Primacy of Policy and the 'Trinity' in Clausewitz's mature Thought', in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 82.

intertwined with the latter to the extent that emotions are invariably aroused where physical force or violence is a feature of the relationship between human groups, whether threatened or actually used. In Clausewitz's work a definite connection between the act of force and emotion is revealed and they are presented as almost inseparable: at one point Clausewitz notes that, 'Essentially, combat is an expression of *hostile feelings*.'¹³⁰

In Book 1, Chapter 1 of *On War*, Clausewitz discusses the first interaction to the extreme – 'the Maximum Use of Force' – which can be summarised as the logic of force outdoing opposing force in the abstract (in relation to the military aim alone): if one side uses force unreservedly, the other will be compelled to follow suit or risk being rendered powerless.¹³¹ This rise to extremes is not necessarily determined by hostile emotions, and the use of extremes does not necessarily imply a lack of reason, nevertheless Clausewitz holds that emotions cannot fail to become involved and they then often serve to intensify the escalatory process. A crucial feature of this reciprocal action towards the extreme is the concept of hostile feelings – expressed throughout the section in terms similar to those contained in the trinity. 'Hostile intent' is explained as the universal aspect and relates obliquely to the purpose of war,¹³² whilst in contrast, hostile feeling – or translated as 'instinctive hostility',¹³³ in the J. J. Graham translation – is not deemed a precondition for war, but an ever-present feature once it has broken out: there need not be any great feelings of hostility between groups for war to break out.¹³⁴

Clausewitz states a definite link between these emotional aspects and the physical act of fighting by stating that it would be a fallacy 'to conceive of war as capable of ridding itself of passion', and to do so would imply that fighting would be unnecessary: an algebraical comparison would suffice to settle the matter if war were purely a matter of the intellect.¹³⁵ War can never simply be a

¹³⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 158. Emphasis in original.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 84.

¹³² 'Even the most savage, almost instinctive, passion of hatred cannot be conceived as existing without hostile intent.' Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 84.

¹³³ Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham and ed. F. N. Maude (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 102.

¹³⁴ Although elsewhere, he does suggest that hatreds may exist prior to war breaking out.

¹³⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 84. The intangible play of emotions makes war more than a calculation of force levels; questions of morale, hatred, and passionate intensity all have their share in contributing to outcomes.

rational act: 'if war is an act of force, the emotions cannot fail to be involved.'¹³⁶ The idea is also expressed in his use of the phrase, 'the *impulse* to destroy the enemy,'¹³⁷ and later in Book 1 he refers to the, 'brute discharge of hatred and enmity of a physical encounter.'¹³⁸ War, as an act of force, has an inherent logic, compelled significantly by, as Daniel Moran has put it, the 'violent, irrational emotions that the use of force could inspire'¹³⁹ whereby, through reciprocal actions, it will lead the opposing sides to extremes. Passion is not coterminous with, or the only explanatory factor of, this escalation, but it cannot be considered apart from it because the use of force by humans will always involve the emotions.

From Achilles' all-consuming revenge and relentless fury at Hector for the death of Patroclus, these kinds of forces, described by Clausewitz as a 'flaring-up of mutual rage',¹⁴⁰ have been powerfully recorded throughout history. One recent book turns to Clausewitz in order to express the idea. In Chris Bellamy's comprehensive history of the gruesome experience of Soviet and Axis forces on the Eastern Front during World War II, he stresses the role such violent emotional forces played in pushing the fighting perilously close to Clausewitz's abstract concept of absolute war: 'Violence by one side bred violence on the other. Soviet forces breaking into Germany in 1945 were spurred on by exhortations to exact revenge.'¹⁴¹ He goes on to detail the way in which the notable absence of legal restrictions gave freer rein to these destructive and violent feelings between the two countries.¹⁴²

A similar dynamic is highlighted by Ferguson in his book, *The War of the World*. In a section revealingly entitled 'Hatred in the Trenches', which explores the failure of socialist hopes of international proletarian solidarity superseding national loyalties during World War I, Ferguson describes how 'as the war went on, mutual hatred grew, expunging the common origins and predicaments of the

¹³⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 85.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

¹³⁹ Daniel Moran, 'The Instrument: Clausewitz on Aims and Objectives in War', in Strachan and Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz*, p. 91.

¹⁴⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 159.

¹⁴¹ Chris Bellamy, *Absolute War* (London: Macmillan, 2007), p. 19.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 20-31.

combatants.¹⁴³ Many began to regard the opposing soldiers as ‘a sort of vermin like plague-rat’,¹⁴⁴ hate replaced fear, and, for some, killing became a cathartic, even pleasurable, experience. As in the case of the Eastern Front in World War II, reference is made to the fragility of international law governing the treatment of prisoners in the face of such escalating front-line animosity and desire for revenge.¹⁴⁵ In sentences that remind us of scenes from *Doctor Moreau*, Ferguson reveals how the war unleashed ‘primitive impulses’¹⁴⁶ and so, ‘Attackers and attacked are simultaneously reduced to the level of animals.’¹⁴⁷ Strachan also records such dynamics of hatred in the War: ‘discipline was undermined in battle, as violence begat violence, fighting created hostility and loss of life inspired revenge.’¹⁴⁸ That such dynamics as explained by Ferguson and Strachan were included in Clausewitz’s meaning of this tendency is clear, he states that, ‘Even where there is no national hatred and no animosity to start with, the fighting itself will stir up hostile feelings: violence committed on superior orders will stir up the desire for revenge and retaliation against the perpetrator.’¹⁴⁹

Extreme hatred can cause mindless killing and acts of barbarity to become a matter of course for those involved, at least while caught in the midst of passion, surrounded by others equally entranced in such a violent psychosis. So, Achilles, gripped by rage, desecrates Hector’s corpse, and he even ‘outrages the senseless clay in all his fury.’¹⁵⁰ In modern times, William Polk describes how the Croatia *Ustase* rebels, during World War II, became so caught up in a whirlwind of murder and destruction against Serbian villages that, ‘Killing became a cult, an obsession... Some Ustase collected the eyes of the Serbs they had killed...proudly displaying them and other human organs in the cafes of Zagreb.’¹⁵¹ Sadly human history records far too many instances of such impassioned brutality. A common feature of many terrorist campaigns and

¹⁴³ Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: History’s Age of Hatred* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 123.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁴⁵ Although, as Ferguson points out, the majority of prisoners were treated in accordance with the law. As he states, the point is that ‘the numbers involved mattered less than the perception that surrender was risky.’ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126,

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁴⁸ Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (London: Pocket Books, 2006), p. 125.

¹⁴⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 159.

¹⁵⁰ Homer, *The Iliad*, p. 590.

¹⁵¹ William Polk, *Violent Politics: A History of Insurgency, Terrorism and Guerrilla War, from the American Revolution to Iraq* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), p. 80.

insurgencies is the spiral of violence that tends to develop where attacks lead to harsh retribution or overreaction by the ruling authorities, which either prompts revenge attacks by terrorists or drives more recruits into the insurgency;¹⁵² further attacks are conducted and the situation descends into a cycle of revenge and reprisals – a situation which terrorists often actively seek to create through their use of violence against civilian targets.¹⁵³ These examples are certainly some of the most obvious ways in which passions are aroused in war, and as primarily expressed in terms of hatred and animosity towards the enemy. ‘Hostile feelings’ will generally be aroused where violence occurs in human social relations.

Sources of passion and irrationality

As Clausewitz himself notes, it would be pedantic to try to outline all the various ways in which emotional, psychological, and moral factors impact on war. Nevertheless, it is perhaps useful, drawing upon some ideas Clausewitz discusses, to consider some of the most notable sources of passion in relation to war other than those associated with the act of force itself as described above. The different conditions created by and characterising any particular war accounts for the differing extents to which emotions are aroused or irrational influences come to dominate the conduct of war: levels of hostility can fluctuate from one conflict to the next, or even multiple times within the same war.¹⁵⁴ The following discussion considers some of the prominent factors that cause passion and irrational behaviour to be prevalent in war.

Clausewitz believed a major determinant was the nature and importance of the political object, the cause being fought for. Some commentators claim that this can be of great strategic significance, to the extent that those fighting for a just end are instilled with a sense of moral superiority. Richard Overy has argued this compellingly in his analysis of *Why the Allies Won* in World War II, noting that ‘the Allies ‘fought not only because the sum of their resources added

¹⁵² As Gray notes, government overreaction to terrorism can aid recruitment to the terrorist cause. *War, Peace, and International Relations*, p. 247.

¹⁵³ Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York: New York Review Books, 2006), p. 500.

¹⁵⁴ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 73.

up to victory, but because they wanted to win and were certain that their cause was just.’¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Thucydides noted that the Spartans fought poorly in the first part of their war with Athens because of the guilt they felt at having broken the treaty that existed between them.¹⁵⁶ However, Gray warns about placing too much emphasis on such factors when who exactly is fighting ‘the good fight’ is not always clear and inherently subjective, even though in some cases the justice of the cause might confer ‘notable strategic advantage.’¹⁵⁷

Of course, in some wars the emotions of the army or the people are actively roused by the leadership in order to drum up enthusiasm, or attain support for the operation.¹⁵⁸ The deliberate mobilisation of hostile feelings of the population or the military by the leadership is common practice: fear may be encouraged by exaggerating the threat posed by the enemy, whilst ‘hate training’ and propaganda may be employed, or the media utilised to portray ‘the other side as vermin, insects, dogs, and other noisome creatures.’¹⁵⁹ Of course such practices often result in contraventions of the laws of war, atrocities, and massacres – the enemy is perceived as sub-human and therefore exceptions to norms are considered justified, even necessary.¹⁶⁰

The length of hostilities can have a great impact on the play of emotional forces, particularly in terms of hostile feelings toward the enemy.¹⁶¹ In Section 14, Chapter 1, Book 1 of *On War* – in relation to continuous action in war – Clausewitz explains how such ceaseless activity would ‘arouse men’s feelings

¹⁵⁵ Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (London: Pimlico, 1996), p. 325. A more detailed analysis of this aspect of the war is presented in Chapter 9, ‘Evil Things, Excellent Things: The Moral Contest’, pp. 282-313.

¹⁵⁶ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, pp. 487-88. Later, the situation was reversed and the Spartans believed it was Athens ‘who was in the wrong through having committed exactly the same fault as theirs had been before, and they went into the war with enthusiasm.’

¹⁵⁷ Gray, *Modern Strategy*, p. 31. Overy concedes that such distinctions are indeed blurred. Overy, *Allies*, p. 285-86.

¹⁵⁸ McInnes quotes Samuel Hynes in relation to World War I: ‘Hatred of the Germans would have to be generated among both the troops and the civilian population and for that a propaganda of atrocities would be a flammable fuel. A general rule applies: To make a people forget their humanity in war, make their enemy inhuman.’ Colin McInnes, *Spectator-Sport Warfare: The West and Contemporary Conflict* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 63.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Ignatieff, *The Warriors Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 56.

¹⁶⁰ Consider, for instance, the appalling atrocities committed by highly indoctrinated Nazi *Waffen-SS* units against Jews and Slavs in Eastern Europe after June 1941 including widespread summary execution of prisoners and civilian massacres.

¹⁶¹ Creveld draws attention to this in relation to sieges, stating that, ‘The longer and the more difficult the siege...the more likely it was that troops would wreak vengeance in an orgy of murder, plunder, and rape.’ Creveld, *Transformation of War*, p. 77.

and inject them with more passion and elemental strength.’¹⁶² Of course, time may, in some circumstances, have an opposite effect whereby the vigour, passion, and enthusiasm displayed in the early parts of a war are dampened by the travails of battle and gruesome reality of the ordeal. Jomini points to this phenomenon in relation to wars, such as those of the Revolution, in which human passions were ‘excited in a temporary paroxysm, of less duration as it is the more violent.’ In these cases, ‘Time is the true remedy’ as the ‘storms soon pass away and reason resumes her sway.’¹⁶³ Clausewitz similarly notes how wars of national liberation may ‘start out full of vigor and enthusiasm’ but if many soldiers and civilians are killed, wounded, or taken prisoner then often ‘such defeats would soon dampen its ardour.’¹⁶⁴

Linked to the idea of time is the factor of the cumulative impact of lives lost and sacrifices already made, which often serves to justify continued fighting for the sake of those already fallen and fuels anger and animosity towards the enemy.¹⁶⁵ Fighting in such cases tends to be suffused with notions of revenge and retribution.¹⁶⁶ This constitutes a major instance of the way in which the course of war itself can cause military dynamics – the ‘grammar’ of war – to escape policy control. The emotional imperative to achieve victory for the sake of those already fallen may inspire continued resistance where there is little rational hope of success. This was a factor which contributed to the slaughter of World War I. As Dyer notes, ‘When sixty million men have been ordered into uniform and sent off to risk their lives; when in France, for example, one in three of the male population...has been killed or wounded...when the people’s willingness to go on making sacrifices has been sustained by hate propaganda

¹⁶² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 93.

¹⁶³ Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Texas: El Paso Norte Press, 2005), p. 20.

¹⁶⁴ He goes on to note that, ‘No matter how brave a people is, how warlike its traditions, how great its hatred of the enemy...the fact remains that a national uprising cannot maintain itself where the atmosphere is too full of danger.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 582-83. Seneca made a very similar point in relation to the effect of anger: ‘An empty swelling with a violent onset, like winds which rise from the earth and, begotten in river and marsh, are strong without staying power, it begins with a mighty impulse, and then fails exhausted before its time.’ Seneca, ‘On Anger’, p. 35.

¹⁶⁵ ‘What rough campaigns they’d fought to an end together/What hardships they had suffered, cleaving their way/through wars of men and pounding waved at sea.’ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 588.

¹⁶⁶ This was one explanation for the widespread practice of the killing of prisoners during World War I. Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Granta Books, 1999), pp. 182-83.

that depicts the war as a moral crusade against fathomless evil – then governments cannot just stop the fighting.’¹⁶⁷

Perhaps the most potent emotion in war is quite simply fear; the anticipation of future pain, danger, or suffering. There is nothing like fear to overwhelm reason and induce behaviour which people ordinarily would not think themselves capable.¹⁶⁸ Fear may arise from concerns about spies, turncoats, or fifth columnists, which can induce widespread paranoia, indiscriminate purges, or internal dislocation and paralysis. This is often a major concern of insurgent and terrorist groups; indeed, elements of the Algerian F.L.N. almost destroyed themselves this way.¹⁶⁹ The effect of fear is particularly noticeable in cases of units, armies, or even whole nations that face probable defeat, and particularly where capitulation, surrender, or retreat is not a viable option. Such situations may occur either because the enemy will allow no quarter, the sacrifices demanded are unconditional, geography precludes falling back, or perhaps the leadership has issued orders to fight to the last man and execute ‘cowards’ and deserters. In some cases, the prevailing military culture may be suffused with notions of self-sacrifice and no-surrender, such as displayed by the Imperial Japanese military during World War II in which fascist militarism merged with notions derived from the knightly Samurai *Bushido* code, which emphasised honour until death.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Dyer, *Lethal Custom*, pp. 265-66.

¹⁶⁸ In Book 2, Clausewitz notes how combat gives rise to the element of danger, which in turn can produce an ‘immediate instinct’ of fear for one’s physical survival. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 159. Fear might also exert its influence in the form of the psychological effect it has on the commander bearing the responsibility for many soldiers’ lives, ‘that lays a tenfold burden’ on his mind, p. 160.

¹⁶⁹ Alistair Horne recounts how in 1957 French intelligence turned a number of senior F.L.N. fighters, in one case leading to the arrest of the entire F.L.N. general staff of a zone in the Kabilyia Wilaya (province). This success ‘struck at the Achilles’ heel of the whole F.L.N.: the mutual distrusts, hatreds and fears of betrayal that...seethed constantly just beneath the surface.’ A major, self-perpetuating purge was launched by the Wilaya leader, Amirouche, to ‘amputate all the gangrened limbs’, and which soon spread to other provinces. With further French intelligence successes, this paralysing fear of treachery led to more rounds of internal incrimination, torture, and purges over 1958 and 1959, with as many as 3,000 women and men victim to such madness, and which contributed to the military emaciation of the F.L.N.’s campaign. Horne, *Savage War of Peace*, pp. 258-61 and 322-25.

¹⁷⁰ This was of course famously manifested in the Kamikaze attacks by Japanese military aviators against US shipping, and in the suicidal human-wave ‘Banzai charge’ witnessed during the island land battles during the Pacific War. John Keegan notes that, ‘The Samurai class...had imposed its own knightly code of honour on the peasant recruits. It was only in the 1930s, when fanatically nationalist officers took charge, that the Japanese armed forces began deliberately to brutalise recruits in training, with the object of filling them with hate that would then be turned on foreigners. Tens of thousands of Allied prisoners-of-war suffered the consequences; so did

In such situations, desperation can generate great feats of strength fuelled by great passion, much as an animal is most dangerous when cornered or on the verge of death. In the section of *On War* on the ‘culminating point of victory’ Clausewitz notes how the commander must assess whether ‘the burning pain of the injury he has dealt will make the enemy collapse with exhaustion or, like a wounded bull, arouse his rage.’¹⁷¹ On this phenomenon, the seventeenth century jurist Hugo Grotius noted that, ‘Even for the stronger party, when flushed with victory, peace is a safer expedient, than the most extensive successes. For there is the boldness of despair to be apprehended from a vanquished enemy, dangerous as the bite of a ferocious animal in the pangs of death.’¹⁷² Such responses to fear may enable heroic feats of bravery and survival against the odds, yet also it may simply expedite the inevitable; as Seneca put it, ‘That is how an animal, struggling against the noose, tightens it’.¹⁷³ Similarly, at the national level, as Victoria Wedgwood notes of Spain in the early seventeenth century, ‘a great state in its decline may yet be more powerful than a small state not yet arrived at greatness.’¹⁷⁴ In Spain’s case, its struggle to forestall its own military and economic demise during the Thirty Years War certainly tightened the noose.¹⁷⁵

At the tactical level, a classic piece of military wisdom advises to always leave your enemy a ‘golden bridge’ to avoid the ferocity with which a cornered group is likely to resist, because in a battle for survival ‘anything goes.’ Tellingly, in his *Guerrilla Warfare*, Che Guevara refers to the ‘encirclement face’ displayed by surrounded troops.¹⁷⁶ Some of military history’s most notable battles occurred under such circumstances, from the Spartans’ ‘glorious

millions of Chinese civilians.’ John Keegan, *War and Our World: The Reith Lectures 1998* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), p. 53.

¹⁷¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 692-93. He notes how ‘Sometimes, stunned and panic-stricken, the enemy...may be seized by a fit of enthusiasm: there is a general rush to arms, and resistance is much stronger after the first defeat than it was before’, p. 688.

¹⁷² Quoted in Paddy Ashdown, *Swords and Ploughshares: Bringing Peace to the 21st Century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007), p. 43.

¹⁷³ Seneca, ‘On Anger’, p. 93. He also states that, anger, ‘driving down and flattening whatever stands in its way, it results more often in its own ruin’, pp. 28-29

¹⁷⁴ Victoria Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), p. 29.

¹⁷⁵ Its desperate bid to keep its Empire together required a massive military effort which eventually led to bankruptcy and hence military and political decline. Gat notes that the Spanish debt in 1623 spiralled to ten years of royal receipts. *War in Human Civilisation*, p. 493.

¹⁷⁶ He describes it as ‘the face of fear worn by someone who was frightened.’ Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (London: Souvenir Press, 2003), p. 63.

annihilation' at Thermopylae in 480,¹⁷⁷ to the British stand at Rorke's Drift in 1879,¹⁷⁸ to the Russian defence of Stalingrad over the Winter of 1942-43.¹⁷⁹ In all such cases the prospect of almost certain defeat prompted displays of infinite courage. Also, in a different yet related fashion, terrorist groups often commit their worst attacks when the authorities are closing in on them or when the cause looks increasingly hopeless, as displayed in the Real IRA's Omagh bombing in 1998 which killed twenty-nine people.¹⁸⁰ During the 1980s, the remnants of the West German Red Army Faction conducted a spate of pointless murders after the failure of the 'German Autumn' in 1977.¹⁸¹ Or consider the last-ditch campaign of bombings and assassinations launched in the early 1960s by the far-right nationalist *Organisation de L'Armée Secrète* (OAS) to prevent Algerian independence following president de Gaulle's promises of a referendum on the issue.¹⁸² As Alistair Horne notes in his magisterial account of the conflict, 'born of despair' the OAS through its appalling acts expedited that which they sought to prevent.¹⁸³

The factor of fear is closely related to the types of wars that are, as Clausewitz puts it, 'a struggle for political existence.'¹⁸⁴ Clausewitz states that, 'like a drowning man who will clutch instinctively at a straw, it is a natural law of the moral world that a nation that finds itself on the brink of an abyss will try

¹⁷⁷ Victor David Hanson, 'Genesis of the Infantry', in Geoffrey Parker (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Warfare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 24.

¹⁷⁸ The small contingent of around 100 British soldiers, in what was 'an epic defence', fought back wave upon wave of Zulus. Williamson Murray, 'Towards World War', in Parker, *Cambridge History*, p. 253.

¹⁷⁹ In the case of Stalingrad, as ordered by Stalin, the city was to be defended at all costs. Order 227 stated, 'Not a step back! This must now be our chief slogan. It is necessary to defend to the last drop of blood every position, every metre of Soviet territory, to cling on to every shred of Soviet earth and to defend it to the utmost.' Stalin also created many blocking detachments to prevent or punish deserters. Order 227 provided a great boost to morale, alongside increased patriotic and anti-German hate propaganda. Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars: From World War to Cold War, 1939 – 1953* (Bury St Edmunds: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 126-34. Also, civilians were prevented from leaving the cities in the hope this would encourage stronger resistance to the German operation. Keegan, *Second World War*, p. 186.

¹⁸⁰ British Prime Minister Tony Blair described the bombing as 'an appalling act of savagery and evil.' BBC News website, 'Bomb atrocity rocks Northern Ireland', 16 August 1998. Available online at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/151985.stm>, retrieved 14 November 2008.

¹⁸¹ Stefan Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), p. 436.

¹⁸² See Horne, *Savage War of Peace*, pp. 480-504.

¹⁸³ As Horne notes, by early 1962, 'The crisis in the Algerian war had been reached in Metropolitan France. *Algérie française* was all but dead – killed by the O.A.S. Almost universally there was a feeling: '*Il faut en finir*'. Ibid., p. 504. Aron describes their actions as 'tragic buffoonery.' *Clausewitz*, p. 371.

¹⁸⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 108.

to save itself by any means.’¹⁸⁵ Elsewhere he notes that, ‘No nation has ever responded to repression by another with anything except hatred and enmity.’¹⁸⁶ Similarly, Jomini warns about engaging in such ‘national wars.’¹⁸⁷ He advises that to succeed in such difficult wars it is necessary to avoid giving the impression that independence is threatened and to ‘calm the popular passions in every possible way.’¹⁸⁸ Like Jomini, Clausewitz lived through a period in which the peoples of countries threatened by emasculation under the Napoleonic Empire fought brutal campaigns of liberation. For a number of years the Spanish – supported by Wellington’s British army – fought an intense guerrilla campaign against French occupation, itself often described as a consequence of Napoleon’s ambition and greed.¹⁸⁹ The greater spirit and vigour of citizen-soldiers fighting for independence has been apparent since Herodotus proclaimed it to be a crucial factor in the Greek victory over Persia.¹⁹⁰ Such wars of national survival are often typified by great hatreds and, in consequence, great brutality in the form of massacres, reprisals, and other contraventions of the laws of war.

The natural passions aroused by a people when foreign troops are present in their country represents a particular problem for modern humanitarian military interventions. Even though conducted for purportedly altruistic reasons, this cannot override a people’s sense of dignity and desire for self-governance.¹⁹¹ This is particularly the case in countries imbued with an intense nationalism, fierce independence, or traditions of resistance against occupation. In such conditions there is a strong likelihood of impassioned resistance from some

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in Handel, *Masters*, p. 198.

¹⁸⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, ‘Notes on History and Politics’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 270.

¹⁸⁷ Jomini, *Art of War*, p. 27.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁸⁹ David Gates, *The Spanish Ulcer: A History of the Peninsular War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Da Capo Press, 2001), p. 5.

¹⁹⁰ ‘Thus Athens went from strength to strength, and proved, if proof were needed, how noble a thing equality before the law is...for while they were oppressed under tyrants, they had no better success in war than any other of their neighbours, yet, once that yoke was thrown off, they proved the finest fighters in the world. This clearly shows that, so long as they were held down by authority, they deliberately shirked their duty in the field, as slaves shirk working for their masters; but when freedom was won, then every man amongst them was interested in his own cause.’ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey de Sélincourt (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 307.

¹⁹¹ Michael Ignatieff notes that, ‘What defeated the Americans in Vietnam, among many other things, was a failure to understand that liberal good intentions, even when equipped with helicopter gunships, are no match for the aroused power of modern nationalism.’ Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 117.

quarters. As Lawrence Freedman reminds us, 'Whilst the stakes for the intervening powers may be limited those for the local parties are likely to be total.'¹⁹² Western states, driven by a progressive and idealistic belief in the righteousness of their actions can be blinded to the natural impulse of a people's sense of independence, no matter what the putative 'worthy' purpose of the presence of foreign armies may be (behind which many natives impute designs of more permanent occupation, which may not always be wholly mistaken).¹⁹³

Clausewitz's comment – in a piece on 'The Germans and the French' – that, 'Love and loyalty need time to take root in the hearts of even the most passionate men, but hatred and vengeance can be ignited in an instant'¹⁹⁴ might be particularly pertinent with regard to the wars in the Former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In *The Warrior's Honor*, Michael Ignatieff draws attention to the impact of the related notion of 'the deadly dynamic of the narcissism of minor difference'.¹⁹⁵ In Yugoslavia, people from different ethnic groups had coexisted, grown up together, and even widely intermarried, but it only took a matter of weeks for these bonds to fragment and for great hatreds to arise.¹⁹⁶ Indeed, Ignatieff notes the paradox that 'the emotions stirred up within commonality are more violent than those aroused by pure and radical difference...[there are] no hatreds more intractable than those between the closest kin.'¹⁹⁷ It is often as though in situations of uncertainty and insecurity the smaller the differences between groups the more aggressively they must be expressed and the greater the effort (often in the form of propaganda or the peddling of historical myth) that must be invested in convincing each other that they *are* enemies, that the 'other' *does* represent a grave and menacing threat.¹⁹⁸ In such circumstances humans

¹⁹² Lawrence Freedman, 'The age of liberal wars', in David Armstrong, Theo Farrell, and Bice Maiguashca (eds.), *Force and Legitimacy in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 103.

¹⁹³ For instance, following interventions in Kosovo and Afghanistan America maintains massive military bases, such as Camp Bondsteel and Bagram Air base respectively. Ignatieff notes that, 'The imperial design needs to be stressed, because the usual way of describing Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan, as wards of the 'international community', obscures the imperial interests that brought them under the administration of the United Nations in the first place. None of these three cases would have been chosen as a suitable case for humanitarian treatment had they not also been a practical venue for the exercise of military force by the United States.' *Ibid.*, p. 110.

¹⁹⁴ Clausewitz, 'The Germans and the French', p. 255.

¹⁹⁵ Ignatieff, *Warrior's Honor*, p. 71.

¹⁹⁶ Ignatieff emphasises how it is often the disintegration of the state that results in a 'Hobbesian fear' and 'mutual paranoia' and that lies at the root of such conflict. *Ibid.*, pp. 7 and 36.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-8.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-53.

tend to lose their capacity to reason and become swept up in terrible fantasies that can so rapidly lead to the spiral of war, ethnic cleansing, and genocide.

Such impassioned hatred is a common feature of many wars between groups ostensibly divided by minor differences, where political power becomes increasingly centred around appeals to, sometimes ‘imagined’ or inauthentic, group identities.¹⁹⁹ Consider, for instance, the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Although ethnic divisions were not entirely fabricated, conceptions of the superiority of Tutsis over the ‘dark agricultural’ Hutu was largely a Belgian colonial construct for the purpose of political control, and which would serve as powerful basis for later Hutu notions of oppression.²⁰⁰ Indeed, a common Rwandan refrain is, ‘You can’t tell us apart, we can’t tell us apart.’ In this sense, Ignatieff describes ethnicity as a ‘mask, constantly repainted’.²⁰¹ In such ways, the identities that come to define friend and enemy are often only created through the process of war itself. Helen Graham has noted how in the first year of the Spanish Civil War, a common Republican identity was rapidly forged as a result of aerial bombing of Madrid and rising death tolls.²⁰² Indeed, civil wars – with brother pitted against brother, sometimes literally – are generally marked by an intensity of emotion and hatred, where issues are more immediate and personal, and where identity, for many, becomes synonymous with survival.²⁰³

To provide such examples as outlined above is not to argue that massacres, atrocities, and other such horrors in war are purely the result of passionate hatreds. Indeed, the record of the twentieth century suggests a common cause of such acts derive from perverted forms of rationality and cold calculation – such as associated with the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing in the

¹⁹⁹ The type of process that creates such a situation is brilliantly summarised by Ignatieff: ‘Disintegration of the state comes first, nationalist paranoia comes next. Nationalist sentiment on the ground, among common people, is a secondary consequence of political disintegration, a response to the collapse of state order and the interethnic accommodation that it made possible. Nationalism creates communities of fear, groups held together by the conviction that their security depends on sticking together.’ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁰⁰ René Lamarchand, ‘Ethnicity as Myth: The View from Central Africa’, *Occasional Paper*, Centre for African Studies, University of Copenhagen, May 1999, pp. 1-17.

²⁰¹ Ignatieff, *Warrior’s Honor*, p. 56.

²⁰² Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 49-50. Graham notes how the war created a ‘specifically Republican consciousness amongst many combatants who had had no pre-war political affiliations’, p. 58.

²⁰³ Gray, *War, Peace, and International Relations*, p. 255.

Balkans during the 1990s – which makes such crimes all the more deplorable.²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, it is also clear that hatreds and animosities can cause humans to behave in despicable ways. The worst excesses of World War II tended to accompany the clash of armies fuelled by notions of the animal nature of the enemy (and which proved particularly effective when the enemy was of a different race) – this was particularly apparent in the Pacific theatre of World War II.²⁰⁵ Again, this is nothing new. Seneca powerfully depicted the extremes to which passions led in Roman times: ‘Look and you will see cities of greatest renown, their very foundations now scarcely discernible – *anger cast them down*; deserts, mile after mile without inhabitant – *anger emptied them*...look upon gathered throngs put to the sword, on the military sent to butcher the populace en masse, on whole people condemned to death in an indiscriminate devastation.’²⁰⁶

Other sources of emotion and irrationalism may derive from religious belief or superstition, the impact of which can be varied and complex: they can constitute a potent cause of war, greatly impinge on how it is conducted, shape the conventions under which it is fought, serve as a cynical means of raising armies, or significantly bolster the conviction, courage, and morale of a fighting force. Although wars are rarely purely about religious matters, wars fought over religious differences, by theocratic states, or as campaigns of conversion have been common in human history – from the Muslim Conquests, to the Crusades of the Middle Ages, to the Religious Wars of the sixteenth century following the Reformation²⁰⁷ – and are commonly distinguished by their ferocity. Many other wars, not ostensibly ‘about’ religion have been greatly influenced, or rendered

²⁰⁴ Bourke notes that some early pacifists had a ‘preference for hate-induced killing on the grounds that the thought that men might be capable of killing without passion was too deplorable to countenance.’ Bourke, *Intimate History*, p. 151. But killing in cold-blood is not a purely modern phenomenon. As Dyer notes, ‘the ruthless extermination of the entire population, even down to babies and animals, of Jericho [in the twelfth century BC] after the Israelites captured it was presumably an act of calculated frightfulness meant to ease the conquest of the promised land by terrifying the rest of the original inhabitants into submission or flight.’ Perhaps this was an ancient instance of premeditated ethnic cleansing. Dyer, *Lethal Custom*, p. 105.

²⁰⁵ It was a ‘very long, widespread, and notoriously brutal war in which, fanned by propaganda, national and – it must be stressed – racial hatreds had been whipped up.’ Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 164. See also Bourke, *Intimate History*, p. 155.

²⁰⁶ Seneca quoted in Sherman, *Stoic Warriors*, p. 79. Emphasis added.

²⁰⁷ This is not to argue that these wars were not intensely political at the same time, only the power being contested and the guiding motivations were of a primarily religious nature.

more intractable, by matters of faith,²⁰⁸ such as in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and the Levant in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁰⁹ Although wars dominated by a religious element waned during the modern period, recently, particularly with the rise of Islamic radicalism and the behaviour of an American administration run for eight years by an evangelical Christian,²¹⁰ the role of religion in war has returned to centre stage.²¹¹

The precise impact of religion in these respects is uncertain and ambiguous, but it is best conceived as an irrational or emotional influence. Faith might induce a hope of salvation where there is none or encourage actions that are strategically crippling,²¹² whilst religious conviction – the belief that ‘God is on our side’²¹³ – can greatly contribute to morale (and is often exploited by leaders to inspire troops or sow hatred) and convince soldiers that their own death will not be meaningless. Medieval warfare was particularly influenced by such notions, where divine providence – as opposed to human tenacity – was believed to be the prime determinant of success. Religious influences, whilst often encouraging excesses in war bred of the need to stamp out apostasy or forcefully convert unbelievers, may also constitute powerful forces discouraging violence and encouraging restraint, pity, or mercy during war – even where such

²⁰⁸ Also, it should be noted that wars motivated by apparently religious reasons, might shroud other more worldly objectives.

²⁰⁹ As Ignatieff notes in relation to the Yugoslavia, religious differences were not central to the conflicts there and that it ‘was precisely because the religious differences were fading away that they triggered such an exaggerated defense.’ Ignatieff, *Warrior’s Honor*, p. 55.

²¹⁰ *The Economist* notes that George W. Bush’s faith ‘emphasises emotion – particularly the intensely emotional experience of being born again – over ratiocination.’ *The Economist*, ‘George’s Bush’s legacy’, 17 January 2009, p. 26. Suskind notes how Bush ‘embraced the language of bold action and messianic faith...He used words like ‘mission’ and ‘crusade.’ He spoke a nation being guided by divine will in ‘defeating evil’...and bringing ‘God’s gift,’ the democratic form of government, to all humanity...with fear and faith fused in fact starved environment, sober, reasoned debate was essentially tabled.’ Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2006), p. 294.

²¹¹ See Greg Austin, Todd Kranock, and Thom Oommen, ‘God and War: an Audit and an Exploration’. Available online at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/world/04/war_audit_pdf/pdf/war_audit.pdf>, retrieved 10 December 2008.

²¹² Wells suggests that the fact that Jewish Pharisees would not work on the Sabbath meant they failed to destroy Pompey the Great’s siege train and he was able to subdue Jerusalem. H. G. Wells, *The Outline of History* (London: Cassell. 1920), p. 282.

²¹³ Toward the end of the American Civil War President Abraham Lincoln famously stated that, ‘In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God cannot be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time.’

action may not make rational military sense.²¹⁴ Indeed, the Just War tradition (powerfully shaped by the work of Catholic scholars such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas), whilst at times certainly providing a powerful rationale *for* war (often against the wishes of its leading theorists),²¹⁵ has been a major counterweight throughout history to the notion that ‘*inter arma enim silent leges*’²¹⁶ – at least with respect to fellow children of God.

Closely related to the influence of religious faith on war is that of secular ‘quasi-religious’ or millenarian political ideologies.²¹⁷ Jomini termed conflicts based on such notions ‘wars of opinion’ and noted that wars fought for political dogmas ‘are most deplorable...[as] they enlist the worst passions and become vindictive, cruel, and terrible.’²¹⁸ It was, of course, the element of passionate utopianism of the Revolutionaries, in particular of the Jacobins, which Clausewitz recognised as a major factor enabling the rag-tag French armies to first successfully face the professional armies of the European monarchies and then to move ‘with such confidence and certainty’ during the wars of the following years.²¹⁹ More recently, an Italian Red Brigade terrorist commander could state that, ‘All of us...were drug addicts of a particular type, of ideology. A murderous drug, worse than heroin.’²²⁰ Yet the ‘depth of feeling’²²¹ associated with such wars can equally lead to impossible dreams, hubris, and ultimately nemesis as ideological orthodoxy is often maintained at the expense of analysis

²¹⁴ Most of the world’s monotheistic religions by and large encourage peace and non-violence, whilst also stipulating those circumstances in which war may be justified (and along what lines it should be fought). Due to the rise of Islamic Jihadism in recent years, such matters have generated a great deal of debate with respect to what the Qur’an (as well as the *hadith* and *sunna*) does or does not say in this respect. For an interesting discussion, see Mary Halbeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

²¹⁵ Nicholas Rengger has emphasised the extent to which Augustine, for instance, saw war as abhorrent and lamentable, yet in some cases morally necessary. Augustine would have deeply regretted the situation in which – and that some modern conceptions foster – the just war framework might actually encourage rather than restrain war. See Nick Rengger, ‘The judgement of war: on the idea of legitimate force in world politics’, in Armstrong, et al, *Force and Legitimacy in World Politics*, pp. 143-61.

²¹⁶ ‘In times of war, the law falls silent’.

²¹⁷ Martin Wight notes that ‘If qualitative change is more important than quantitative, the striking development in war in the past two hundred years is not its growing destructiveness, but the way it has increasingly become the instrument of doctrinal conviction.’ Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (London: Pelican, 1979), pp. 139-40.

²¹⁸ Jomini, *The Art of War*, p. 19.

²¹⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 716.

²²⁰ Michael Burleigh, *Blood and Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism* (London: Harper Press, 2008), p. 199.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 717.

of strategic realities.²²² John Gray, amongst others, has powerfully argued that it was such blinding utopianism that largely explains American failures in Iraq after 2003.²²³

Finally, we should not underestimate the extent to which the state of existing technology can impact on the emotional aspects of war. Clausewitz notes how, in ancient warfare, due to the state of existing weaponry, ‘the fighting spirit of the individual came from the hand to hand combat to which every battle generally led.’²²⁴ Yet, the reduced proximity between belligerents engendered by rapid advances in weapons development – principally over the last 150 years – has raised the possibility of war fought with a minimum of emotion. Modern ‘push-button warfare’ is said to be more impersonal, sterile, and thus less susceptible to being influenced by the intense emotions of close combat. The apotheosis of this form of warfare supposedly came in 1999 with Nato’s air war over Kosovo, fought at 15,000 feet and with zero alliance casualties.²²⁵ Yet, there are a number of reasons for caution with regard to the supposed limitation of emotions in modern technological warfare.

First, it has been observed that it is often civilians who display more hatred toward an enemy than soldiers themselves, perhaps casting doubt on the importance of proximity.²²⁶ For actual soldiers, Kaplan suggests that the increased distance between a violent act and the perpetrator might actually

²²² Deist notes, for instance, that ‘German racism and ruthless exploitation of the material and human resources of the occupied areas increasingly inclined their populations to resistance rather than collaboration – with disastrous consequences for Germany’s conduct of the war. Hitler’s social-Darwinist conviction that ‘struggle in all its forms’ determined the development of peoples further reduced the role of rationality in Germany’s Wartime policy. Although well aware that the strategic initiative had passed to his enemies, he rejected all peace feelers and remained determined to a barbaric end...For someone with such a mentality, strategy was a concept from a bygone age.’ Wilhelm Deist, ‘The road to ideological war: Germany, 1918-1945’, in Williamson Murray, Williamson, MacGregor Knox, and Alvin Bernstein (eds.), *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 391.

²²³ Gray, *Black Mass*.

²²⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, ‘Letter to Fichte’, in Carl von Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 283.

²²⁵ ‘Clausewitz would have called Kosovo a cabinet war...it was fought by no more than 1,500 NATO airmen, and the elite specialists of the Serbian air defense...It was fought in VTC conference rooms, using target folders flashed up on screen, and all that a commander like [General Wesley K.] Clark ever saw of the rush of battle was the gun camera footage...[Such wars] do not reach deep into the psyche of a people; they do not demand blood and sacrifice.’ Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and beyond* (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 111.

²²⁶ Bourke, *Intimate History*, p. 160.

expand ‘the scope of impersonal viciousness.’²²⁷ Second, technology is not the only determinant of the emotions soldiers and politicians display. The political context is again vital. One can perhaps expect a US pilot to display a different emotional disposition towards al-Qaeda terrorists than to Serbian soldiers: thresholds of acceptable collateral damage or decisions on appropriate targets may be mediated by such emotional factors. We might question whether the abuses at Abu Ghraib would have occurred devoid of the overarching ideological context, post 9/11, of the Iraq War? Third, if passion is perhaps less evident in some aspects of Western warfare, it still exerts considerable influence, if only in more complex and ephemeral forms, such as through public reactions to civilian casualties, and we must remember that war is still a decidedly real and emotional experience for those on whom the bombs fall. The reactions of the people in such war zones are crucial, particularly when most modern Western wars are fought to shape political conditions in the target state. Fourth, for all the discussion of the predominance of ‘risk-transfer war’²²⁸ and stand-off weapons, it has been clear in the last decade that Western forces have frequently and consistently engaged in intensely up-close and personal forms of combat. Perhaps some of the difficulties Western troops have faced fighting insurgents in Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere has been due to an over-reliance of technology: as Coker remarks, ‘they lacked the ‘human factors’ that Clausewitz tells us allow armies to prevail in battle: courage and hatred being chief among them.’²²⁹

There are of course, countless other factors that may account for the prevalence of emotional factors in war. We might also point to the obvious effect of alcohol and drugs, which have been common features of war throughout the ages, or the way war waged by irregulars or ‘wild hordes’ often carries the stamp of extreme emotional violence, exacerbated by the lack of discipline, formal chains of command, or a prominent warrior ethic.²³⁰ Popular culture may

²²⁷ He also states that, ‘Electronic communications, by allowing us to avoid face-to-face encounters, make cruelty easier to accomplish, as we enter an abstract realm of pure strategy and deception carrying few psychological risks.’ Kaplan, *Warrior Politics*, pp. 11-12.

²²⁸ Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and its Crisis in Iraq* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

²²⁹ Coker, *Waging War*, p. 108.

²³⁰ Ignatieff notes how such warrior codes of honour – such as chivalry or the samurai Bushido – have often served to restrain the worst excesses in war. Ignatieff, *Warrior’s Honor*, pp. 116-18. Howard notes how during the Thirty Years War undisciplined soldiers and armed mobs meant

also act as an irrational influence on war: in Howard's 'Reflections' on World War I, he draws attention to the 'disquieting strain of primitive savagery which composers and artists were beginning to tap'²³¹ and that 'popular emotion...goes far to explain why the war, when it broke out, should have been so prolonged and so bloody.'²³² The irrational influence of *The Culture of War* is the major theme of Creveld's recent work, leading to the adoption of certain practices and behaviour inimical to strategic effectiveness.²³³ Also, our conception of this tendency need not be confined to the effect of passion leading to extremes in war; it may also result in mistaken decisions, misspent energies, ill-considered interventions, and so forth. There are more subtle ways in which actors in war display emotions and irrational behaviour, but which might constitute important variables for understanding any particular conflict. To explore this concept further it is useful to consider the ways in which this tendency relates to other concepts and how it pertains to specific groups in war: to the political leadership, armed forces, and the people.

Passion and politics

In the context of the trinity, the types of forces we have described seemingly threaten to alter, 'if not to overwhelm'²³⁴ the formulation of sensible and reasonable policy or the application of appropriate means. This point is revealed in reverse when Clausewitz states that, 'Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration.'²³⁵ Smith refers to these forces as 'irrational' in order to stress the idea that they reflect instinctive forces rather than being the products of reason: the apparent opposite of some of the ideas we noted in relation to Clausewitz's conception of war as subordinate to policy. In this sense, strong political leadership is often

war degenerated into 'universal, anarchic, and self-perpetuating violence.' Howard, *War in European History*, p. 37.

²³¹ Howard, *Studies*, p. 103.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²³³ Martin van Creveld, *The Culture of War* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008).

²³⁴ Moran, 'The Instrument', p. 91.

²³⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 104.

required to keep popular emotions under control.²³⁶ For instance, the political leadership might have to resist popular demands to wreak vengeance on an enemy, where such a course would not make strategic sense – as Fabius managed during the war with Carthage.²³⁷ This tendency is something that, at times policy may be hard put to control and indeed is often seemingly eclipsed by it.²³⁸ In one section Clausewitz notes that, ‘Between two peoples...there can be such tensions, such a mass of inflammable material’²³⁹ that the war can develop in a way disproportionate to original political interests. Policy has to understand that when it employs force, the emotional reactions of their own forces and of others are highly unstable, variable, and unpredictable. Policy might wish to fight a limited war, but events might lead to a different outcome. Military realities may require substantial use of force, and the resultant effort, might contribute to ‘political goal inflation’ as the public demands objectives which reflect the sacrifices already made.²⁴⁰

Not only does policy attempt to manage such passions, but there is every reason to believe that it can be overwhelmed by them itself: as Creveld notes, ‘Nothing would be more preposterous than to think that, just because some people wield power, they act like calculating machines that are unswayed by passions.’²⁴¹ The extent to which policy will be able to remain immune from or in control of these forces will depend on such factors as the psychological attributes of the leadership and the character of the war-making institutions. Frederick the Great is a good example of a commander who treated his wars as games of power politics, conducted through the calculated application of his resources and considered manoeuvring of his forces in pursuit of clear and achievable aims (primarily geared towards holding onto Silesia, which was ensured by the Treaty of Hubertusburg in 1763 at the conclusion of the Seven

²³⁶ Jan Willem Honig, ‘Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting’ in Gert de Nooy (ed.), *The Clausewitzian Dictum and the Future of Western Military Strategy* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997), p. 113.

²³⁷ Kaplan, *Warrior Politics*, pp. 34-35. Also Seneca makes this point: ‘What enabled Fabius to rebuild the stricken power of our state? He knew how to hold back, postpone, delay – a skill which entirely escapes the angry...Discarding all thought of grief and vengeance, he concentrated simply on expediency and the available opportunities. He overcame anger before overcoming Hannibal.’ Seneca, ‘On Anger’, p. 29.

²³⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 99-100.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁴⁰ Honig, ‘Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting’, p. 117.

²⁴¹ Creveld, *Transformation*, p. 157.

Years War).²⁴² About Frederick, Clausewitz noted that with regard to his political objectives: ‘neither vanity, ambition, not vindictiveness could move him from his course; and it was this course alone that brought him success.’²⁴³ The implication here is that to be effective, policy must remain as isolated as possible from emotional influences.²⁴⁴

Yet, of course, not all leaders and commanders show the type of composure and controlled reason of Frederick, and those responsible for crafting policy can easily be swayed by the types of forces we have described above. Clausewitz refers to these as emotions that are not so much stimulated by the nature of combat itself, but related to it more obliquely: he mentions – no doubt with Napoleon in mind – ‘ambition, love of power, enthusiasms of all kinds.’²⁴⁵ Napoleon perhaps represents the opposite of Frederick in this respect: although he had a rational side, ‘the realistic ruler was dominated by the romantic conqueror.’²⁴⁶ So, likewise, the failure of Athens occurred, according to Thucydides, because they had ‘been seized by a mad passion to possess that which is out of reach’ and were ‘daring beyond their power, bold beyond their judgement.’²⁴⁷ Also, associated with the type of hubris which led Athens into its reckless Sicilian expedition,²⁴⁸ the impact of overreaching ambition, utopian ideology or blinding faith can cause policymakers to make irrational decisions that are not suited to political conditions or available means.

²⁴² Bond, *Pursuit*, p. 23.

²⁴³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 210.

²⁴⁴ Other notable master of the rational control of war in this sense may include the French statesman Cardinal Richelieu and the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. For more on both these figures see Henry Kissinger’s *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

²⁴⁶ Clark, *Civilisation*, p. 213.

²⁴⁷ Thucydides quoted in Coker, *Waging War*, p. 20.

²⁴⁸ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, Launching of the Sicilian Expedition, pp. 414-29. It is Nicias who warns of the danger of what we would today term ‘imperial overstretch’: ‘I think we ought not...get drawn into a war which does not concern us...in going to Sicily you are leaving many enemies behind you, and you apparently want to make new ones there and have them also on your hands...this is no time for running risks or for grasping at a new empire before we have secured the one we have already’, pp. 414-15. Nicias accuses those proposing the expedition, such as Alcibiades, of being motivated by a desire for personal wealth and fame. He warns the assembly: ‘Do not, like them, indulge in hopeless passions for what is not there. Remember that success comes from foresight and not much is gained simply by wishing for it’, p. 417.

Passion and the military

That ‘the military’, broadly defined, does not at first sight warrant association with this tendency for Clausewitz (who associated it mainly with ‘the people’) may appear counterintuitive: surely it is soldiers, as our discussion has emphasised, who are most prone to being inspired with a passionate hatred of the enemy? However, there are powerful reasons why Clausewitz may have reached the conclusion he did, derived from a peculiar way of thinking that has become deeply embedded in the culture of military establishments throughout history, whilst we will also reveal that a proper understanding of *On War* does encompass the military within the concept of passion.

The notion of the military constituting a passionless realm is evident in the tradition or practice of ‘de-personalising and even de-humanising’ soldiers – as Clausewitz put it, turning them into ‘automata’ – in order that they are simply capable of carrying out orders and to help them, as Keegan has noted, ‘avert the onset of fear or, worse, of panic and to perceive a face of battle which, if not familiar, and certainly not friendly, need not, in the event, prove wholly petrifying.’²⁴⁹ As noted, in the age of Frederick the Great soldiers had to be capable of withstanding fire at almost point blank range. Moreover, those soldiers were, as one contemporary put it, largely ‘composed of the slime of the nation’²⁵⁰ and foreign mercenaries, so a great effort had to be made simply to keep troops on the field and avert mass desertion.²⁵¹ As Geoffrey Parker notes, this is a practice firmly rooted in the western way of war from earliest times because, given that smaller Western forces were often pitted against enormous ‘barbarian’ armies, what Clausewitz described as ‘pedantic order and firm discipline’²⁵² was required to ensure formations stood fast ‘without giving way to the natural impulses of fear and panic.’²⁵³ Activities such as drills and marching were designed to instil virtues of self-control and unit cohesion. As Bourke

²⁴⁹ Keegan, *Face of Battle*, pp. 21-22.

²⁵⁰ John A. Lynn, ‘States in Conflict’, in Parker, *Cambridge History*, p. 180.

²⁵¹ Strachan notes that during the Seven Years War, 80,000 men absconded from the Prussian army. Hew Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War* (Kings Lynn: Routledge, 2006), p. 9. See also, p. 31.

²⁵² Carl von Clausewitz, ‘Observations on Prussia in Her Great Catastrophe’, in Clausewitz, *Historical and Political Writings*, p. 37.

²⁵³ Geoffrey Parker, ‘Introduction: The Western Way of War’, in Parker, *Cambridge History*, p. 3.

notes the requirement for emotionless automata was deemed crucial because, ‘After all, blood-lust, rage and hatred were counterproductive responses, making men’s hands tremble when shooting at the enemy.’²⁵⁴

The extremely harsh discipline and unemotional methodism characteristic of the Prussian army in Clausewitz’s time, particularly prior to the reform period, would have been common to most soldiers throughout Europe. The army was an institution built around the need to delimit the play of blind emotion (we stress *delimit* because of course there is a balance to be struck: unleashing the violent emotions of the troops at the right time can be a crucial factor in battle). Nevertheless, it is understandable why Clausewitz perhaps refrained from a direct association of passion with the military given the practical requirement for strongly disciplined, controlled, and cohesive armies, but also in the objective sense that such control has been a feature of armed forces throughout history.

Yet, the issue is more complex than this and no rigid distinction is actually implied in Clausewitz’s conception. This becomes clear when one considers the nature of military institutions as they developed during the Napoleonic era. This was a time when the distinction between the army and the people became increasingly blurred. Where, in the Frederickan age, armies had become almost ‘a state within a state’, Clausewitz witnessed the emergence of the phenomenon of the ‘nation in arms’ where recognisable distinctions between ‘the people’ and the army broke down: civilians were soldiers, soldiers civilians. Of course, in reality, large elements of the population never became soldiers, but often civilians came to identify closely with the armed forces nevertheless (this was particularly the case in America, where the nature of the birth of their nation entailed a strong bond between the military and the people) and, as stipulated in the famous 1793 *levée en masse*, all citizens were to called upon to support the French war effort. Thus, when Clausewitz speaks of the people, we should not be misled into conceiving of a neat sociological distinction or one that might apply today, with small professional armed forces highly isolated from wider society. The emotions of the people not only acted as powerful forces acting on politicians in the form of public opinion, but as a force directly embodied in the military instrument in the form of the civilian in arms.

²⁵⁴ Bourke, *Intimate History*, p. 72.

Even if this is understood, we may take Clausewitz's association of passion with 'the people' more literally. All soldiers, statesmen, and so on, by necessity, are drawn from 'the people' – they are not an alien breed simply on account of their profession, regardless of whatever responsibilities or modes of behaviour they inherit in such roles. To claim that they are not susceptible to similar emotional forces as attributed to 'the masses' is surely mistaken and tantamount to social stereotyping. Indeed, the very reverse may be observed in the case of leaders overcome with ideological or religious passion and a public tending towards restraint and rational moderation (incidentally, a common assumption amongst nineteenth and twentieth centuries liberals such as Jeremy Bentham in the form of the 'doctrine of salvation by public opinion'.²⁵⁵ Although, as Howard has reminded us, 'public opinion is not necessarily so civilized as Bentham would have wished.')²⁵⁶

As the interpretation outlined in this chapter has suggested, this tendency is concerned with the distinctly human element of war. All actors in war are human and 'of the people' and will thus display elements of this tendency to some degree. Just as all individuals are incapable of living purely by the dictates of reason – even Stoics as indomitable as Marcus Aurelius or Seneca²⁵⁷ – so all groups of society, be they ordinary citizens, soldiers, politicians, military commanders, and so forth, can be swept along by passions: the 'World Controllers' of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* do not exist in reality, despite all those who have dreamt of such emotionless rational perfection.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁵ See Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), The Utopian Background, pp. 25-39. 'The belief that public opinion can be relied on to judge rightly on any question rationally presented to it, combined with the assumption that it will act rationally in accordance with this right judgement, is an essential foundation of the liberal creed', p. 27. See also Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience: The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures in the University of Cambridge, 1977* (London: Temple Smith, 1978).

²⁵⁶ Howard, *Reinvention of War*, p. 83. When the British public showed signs (prior to the actual outbreak of the Crimean War) of relishing war against the Russian Empire with frenzied enthusiasm, Richard Cobden – a prominent believer in the natural peaceability of 'the people' – reacted by insinuating that 'somehow the entire English people had been infected with aristocratic vices.' Howard, *Liberal Conscience*, p. 45.

²⁵⁷ As Nancy Sherman notes, 'there are few to no bona fide sages, whether in ancient or modern times, however earnest any given individuals aspirations.' Sherman, *Stoic Warriors*, p. 10. Indeed, Seneca himself at times succumbed to emotion. Robin Campbell notes of Seneca that he 'may well be history's most notable example of a man who failed to live up to his principles.' 'Introduction', in Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, p. 14.

²⁵⁸ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 2004).

Passion and 'the people'

So, despite having established that the play of emotion in war is not confined to any one element of society – as a narrow reading of the secondary trinity might suggest – Clausewitz nevertheless clearly wanted to stress the extent to which this tendency is powerfully expressed through the people, in its more specific sense of what we might term, ‘the masses.’ The role of the people in war has varied significantly, for contextual reasons, throughout history. As noted, the people were very much isolated from the ‘minute but immaculate’²⁵⁹ armies of the eighteenth century, composed mainly of mercenaries, apart from the conscription (or kidnap) of some of the ‘dregs of society’ or, as Wellington put it ‘the scum of the earth.’ The rest of the populace was primarily expected to produce food, pay taxes, and had next to nothing to do with war, except maybe through small segments of middle-class opinion in the towns or when peasants found themselves in the path of a marching army.²⁶⁰ In other times, preceding and post-dating that era, the passions of the people have greatly influenced the course and conduct of war – sometimes as participants, sometimes as crucial constituencies that war leaders have had to respond to or consider in relation to their own power, the stability of the state, and so forth. For instance, during the Thirty Years War civilians were deeply involved, either as rampaging murdering mobs or as their countless victims.²⁶¹

The emotional predispositions and reactions of the people to uses of force can have crucial political implications, particularly if those emotions are converted into armed resistance of various kinds, but also in the indirect sense of

²⁵⁹ Howard, *War in European History*, p. 139.

²⁶⁰ Geoffrey Blainey quotes Adam Smith writing in 1776 that, ‘In great empires, the people who live in the capital, and in the provinces remote from the scene of action, feel, many of them, scarce any inconveniency from the war, but enjoy at their ease the amusement of reading in the newspapers the exploits of their own fleets and armies.’ Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), pp. 8-9. Perhaps this somewhat reflects the type of spectator-sport warfare said to typify the Western experience today. Yet, spectating war is by no means new and was perhaps more direct in earlier times. Plato, for one, advised that children of the *polis* be taken to watch the battlefield in order to learn. American civilians from Washington who had assembled to watch the action, were given an unwelcome shock at the First Battle of Bull Run in July 1861 when they were forced to flee as the Union was unexpectedly pushed back by the Confederate army under General Beauregard: ‘Soldiers discarded their weapons and pressed eastwards...jostling for position among civilians in fine carriages.’ Gary W. Gallagher, Stephen D. Engle, Robert R. Krick, and Joseph T. Glatthaar, *The American Civil War: This Mighty Scourge of War* (Oxford: Osprey, 2003), p. 40.

²⁶¹ See Victoria Wedgwood, *The Thirty Years War* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005).

the impact of diminished legitimacy at home and abroad, declining popular support, or mass protest. Populations may also be a powerful force either pushing leaders into war or appealing for restraint. The impact of the people in these respects has gained increasing importance with the spread of liberal-democratic states and mass-media – although as Gray has pointed out, the ‘strange idea that dictators can ignore domestic constituencies needs to be quashed once and for ever’.²⁶² As we stated in Chapter 4, political power is comprised of much more than material military prowess and the effective use of force should be geared to prevailing political conditions. In this respect, securing and maintaining the support of various constituencies of popular sentiment may constitute the difference between success and failure in war: as Jonathan Swift once remarked, ‘In war, opinion is nine parts in ten.’²⁶³ Clausewitz was well aware of this, even if its relative importance has grown in recent times: he noted how the centre of gravity – ‘the hub of all power and movement on which everything depends’ – might in some cases equate to ‘the personalities of the leaders and public opinion.’²⁶⁴

This is particularly evident, as Clausewitz recognises, in situations of popular uprising and insurgency. In order to offset their material weakness against heavily armed state militaries, insurgents will actively seek to shape the emotions and ensure the allegiance (or even simply the acquiescence) of the population on which they rely to generate support for their cause and undermine the legitimacy of the governing powers: as the axiom has it, ‘the population is the prize.’ Likewise, in order not to fail, counterinsurgent forces must be mindful not to react in ways that further alienate elements of the population through indiscriminate reprisals, collective punishment, or the use of vindictive measures such as torture or the suspension of normal legal rights. Often there is a balance to be struck, but insurgents will often seek to induce just such a response. Insurgent groups often actively seek to instil fear in segments of the population knowing that, for their purpose, ‘the worse the better’ because it is generally the government that is held responsible by civilians for a failure to protect them, thus

²⁶² Gray, ‘Clausewitz rules’, p. 172. He notes that ‘Adolf Hitler was as obsessed with public opinion, and as worried about the consequences of public disapproval, as Bill Clinton.’

²⁶³ Quoted in Horne, *Savage War of Peace*, p. 231.

²⁶⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 720.

draining the latter's legitimacy still further.²⁶⁵ So, insurgencies are primarily conducted within the 'cognitive terrain' of the people's 'hearts and minds'. The fears and the emotions of the population will tend to determine the outcome – which is ultimately about the popular political legitimacy of the government – more than any material preponderance of force (although military dynamics of course shape peoples' perceptions).

A particularly modern manifestation of the impact of popular passions on war has been the rise of pressure from populations in Western states to intervene militarily in the affairs of other states for humanitarian reasons. With the growth of human rights discourse and a global mass-media presenting round-the-clock coverage of conflict and suffering in far-away places, the demand for governments to 'do something' has greatly increased (albeit highly selectively).²⁶⁶ Such pressures lay behind the succession of interventions by the 'international community' after the end of the Cold War. The outcomes of such interventions were extremely mixed, but the point here is the extent to which the initial engagement, the method of intervention, and levels of commitment to the mission in the aftermath have all been crucially shaped by popular opinion – even if, as has been argued, it arouses the emotions of the people only 'in the intense but shallow way that sports do.'²⁶⁷ Often the impulse to do something is highly emotional, in the form of moral outrage, guilt, and compassion (bolstered by a type of liberal utopianism regarding the possibility of success), and rarely is sufficient account taken of the realities and difficulties on the ground.²⁶⁸ Also, the same emotions that inspire intervention often end up pushing for withdrawal or precipitate 'exit strategies' as 'compassion fatigue'²⁶⁹ sets in, concerns over casualties increase, and electorates invariably demand attention on domestic issues. In a common refrain, the impact of the media in such cases is a double edged sword.

²⁶⁵ As Taber noted in his popular study of guerrilla warfare, 'The primary effort of the guerrilla is to militate the population, without whose consent no government can stand for a day.' Robert Taber, *The War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 6.

²⁶⁶ As Ignatieff notes, 'Some pictures, some places engage us; others do not. Our moral engagement with far away places are notoriously selective and partial...Our engagement depends crucially on what narrative is provided for us by the mediators – the writers, journalists, politicians, eyewitnesses – who make the horror of the world available to us.' Ignatieff, *Warrior's Honor*, p. 97.

²⁶⁷ McInnes, *Spectator-Sport Warfare*, p. 55.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Importantly, the above discussion is not to argue that the masses are incapable of reason – in fact, in some cases it might be argued that they show far more reason than the political leadership – but rather just to reveal the varieties of the ways in which the collective emotions of the people can impact on war and how their influence can fluctuate according to prevailing conditions. We need also to reemphasise the external aspect of the tendency in the sense that we are not concerned solely with the passions of the belligerent populations directly involved in war, but also the passions of others affected by or who react upon war, and who may crucially impact on outcomes through being entwined in the wider political web of war.

Implications

Emotion: all bad?

Many of the examples discussed in this chapter have concentrated on the overwhelmingly nefarious types of emotion displayed in war, or that are at least considered disagreeable in everyday human relations. These are indeed the types of emotions which Clausewitz emphasises in the trinity itself – violence, hatred, and enmity – and they reappear when this topic is brought up in other parts of the work. Yet, as we have suggested, there are some indications that Clausewitz held a more balanced perspective with regard to the types of emotion that might impinge on war and affect its course in various respects.

Clausewitz notes that, ‘In considering emotions that have been aroused by hostility and danger as being peculiar to war, we do not mean to exclude all others that accompany man throughout his life’ because in war, ‘a wide variety of passions, good and bad, will arise on all sides. Envy and generosity, pride and humility, wrath and compassion – *all may appear as effective forces in this great drama.*’²⁷⁰ So, a more accurate conception of this tendency would perhaps view passion and emotion as neither something wholly good or bad. Whilst emotion might certainly, as we have seen, be a potent destructive, murderous, or vengeful force that often causes war to rise to extremes and can be a major mainspring of

²⁷⁰ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 160. Emphasis added.

atrocities, brutality, and ferociousness, there is certainly another side to this tendency which is perhaps less obvious at first, but which can be an important element of war.

Humans are, as Clausewitz noted in the quote above, of course capable of a wide variety of emotions which we could describe as good, righteous, commendable, or whatever else we might like to call them. It might be thought that such emotions are likely to be absent in war, where fighting, fear, and death cause all to be pervaded by revenge, hate, and anger. Yet a closer analysis reveals some interesting observations in the sense that war often displays the full panoply of human emotions. Also, the discussion so far has concentrated more on the emotions apparent *between* belligerents, but a full consideration must account for the emotions *within* armed forces, where often quite different emotional forces rule, but that represent equally important influences on the course of events.

Intense love for one's comrades within armed forces is a prevalent feature of military history. Often this might translate into soldiers wishing it had been them that died rather than their 'buddies', acts of astounding self-sacrifice (the image of the soldier diving on the grenade to save others), the way in which commanders often come to be seen as surrogate fathers (as Clausewitz experienced with respect to Scharnhorst), or the common military maxim to never leave a fallen comrade behind. It is in this sense that Coker can claim that militaries, perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, have altruism at their heart. He notes the intersubjective bonds of honour and respect that exist between warriors and the way they form a cohesive guild, sometimes even a fraternity; 'to be esteemed by others is to know greater self-esteem as well.'²⁷¹ Some of the most admirable and commendable emotions are revealed in this respect: courage, duty, loyalty, truthfulness, and community spirit.

Also, a number of historical studies have revealed that in many wars there have developed far more complex relationships between combatants than may be imagined, and which go beyond simplistic assumptions of mutual hatred. Indeed, in many cases combatants deny feeling any particular animosity towards the enemy, going as far to even feel a certain measure of intimacy, respect, or

²⁷¹ Coker, *Waging War*, p. 31.

empathy based on a shared understanding of their common plight.²⁷² So, as Coker states, ‘No one is more ruthless in war than Achilles, but no one is more aware that his enemies deserve respect.’²⁷³ Bourke quotes a telling passage from a World War I soldier’s diary that reveals the tension between the differing emotions discussed here:

On the one side you have all the signs of excessive hate and unbridled passion that shows the innate madness that still lurks in the human soul. On the other you have all the signs of unselfish devotion and kindness of spirit, even towards the man you have just struck in your hate.²⁷⁴

Famously, during that war, a curious phenomenon, was the ‘live and let live’ philosophy that developed in certain sectors of the trenches on the Western Front despite the overwhelming context of ‘kill or be killed.’ Soldiers came to agreements not to fire if the other side would also desist. There were also widespread instances of fraternisation with the enemy, as famously embodied in the ‘Christmas myth.’ Another interesting fact that has emerged from the close study of a number of wars is the many instances of soldiers who never fired at the enemy, even in extreme circumstances, where their own lives would be in greater danger as a result. Bourke quotes a Canadian military instructor who stated that, far from concerns about trigger-happiness, ‘The problem is not to *stop* fire, but to start it, and it is far better to have some excess of enthusiasm than the present lassitude.’²⁷⁵ Studies conducted during World War II revealed a high percentage – sometimes over 75% – of soldiers in combat units who, other than in the case of absolute necessity, simply would not fire at the enemy. It is far from clear exactly what accounts for this phenomenon, but one cannot but suspect that basic emotions of pity, mercy, and humanity might play a part.

Ambiguity

It might be assumed that this tendency of passion and emotion should be understood unequivocally as a force pushing war to extremes. Where it is

²⁷² Bourke, *Intimate History*, p. 141.

²⁷³ Coker, *Waging War*, p. 37.

²⁷⁴ Bourke, *Intimate History*, p. 141.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

powerfully present, particularly as embodied in the people's involvement in war, violent emotions can feed into a process of escalation. We have seen how Clausewitz associated such forces with the 'maximum use of force', whereby the use of force by one side sets off a series of reciprocal actions in which the emotions cannot fail to be involved. The hostile feelings generated – in the form of hatred, anger, and revenge – propel war towards its absolute manifestation. This association he derived from experience, as he had seen what a great difference resulted when, following the French Revolution, the passions of the people were powerfully injected into war. Clausewitz's discussion is certainly biased towards a conception which sees emotion in war as a generally intensifying and escalatory force. The history of war would certainly support such a conception.

Yet, this is not the complete picture in this regard. Not only should this tendency not be conceived as entirely negative, but similarly it can also potentially constitute a limiting force on war itself, for instance as embodied in popular pressures to limit the violence in war, collateral damage,²⁷⁶ and even enemy military casualties.²⁷⁷ Also, popular sentiment may, far from constituting a force propelling states into war, be a powerful force restraining politicians from the resort to arms. Anti-war and pacifist sentiment, driven principally by an emotional revulsion of war, grew exponentially during the course of the twentieth century, primarily following the experience of two enormously costly world wars and the prospect of the end of the human race in a third. This was perhaps an aspect of war Clausewitz could not fully foresee given the conditions of his age and its prevailing social and cultural attitudes. Although there have always been people passionately opposed to war throughout history, the historical norm has largely been one of acceptance of war as 'part of the natural order of things', even as a virtuous, commendable activity.²⁷⁸ The modern rise of anti-war feeling and its specific manifestation in relation to particular wars (as

²⁷⁶ This is noticeably apparent in modern liberal populations based largely on emotional reactions to images of conflict as relayed through the news media.

²⁷⁷ McInnes makes this point in *Spectator-Sport Warfare*: 'If the enemy is no longer the state but a leadership or regime, then it does not necessarily follow that the opposing military in its entirety constitutes the enemy', pp. 73-4. Howard also makes this point in relation to the Gulf War when due to the impact of mass media, publics 'became sensitive not only to the losses of their own armed forces, but even to those inflicted on the enemy.' Howard, *War in European History*, p. 142.

²⁷⁸ Howard, *Reinvention of War*, p. 13.

witnessed in the case of the millions of people who came out to oppose the 2003 War in Iraq on 15 February that year) represents an important factor of this tendency exercising a potentially limiting affect on the conduct of war.

Strategically neutral

Finally, as will have become clear throughout this chapter, for Clausewitz, from a subjective strategic perspective, emotional factors are not depicted in an especially negative or positive light: as he notes, for the attainment of some ends ‘they will have to be stimulated rather than held back.’²⁷⁹ Whether emotions constitute a force to be exploited or a genie to be put back in the bottle will depend on conditions of the war and the specific objectives in view.

In some instances passion may greatly aid progress toward objectives in the form of strengthened morale, vigorous hatred of the enemy, or the support of the people for the cause. The fortitude, strength, and courage instilled in a force inspired by religious devotion or desperate fear might enable it to destroy an enemy twice its size. In this sense, Achilles’ rage, noted above, perhaps did have military utility.²⁸⁰ Also, as we have seen, the positive emotions to be found in war can often constitute powerful factors promoting group cohesion, altruism, and self-sacrifice amongst comrades, all of which can enhance military effectiveness.

Conversely, passion can be a highly detrimental force in war. Excessive anger can lead to irrationalism and is almost impervious to control, as Stoics such as Seneca certainly believed. Seneca considers whether anger might be advantageous to adopt because it ‘rouses and spurs on the mind. Without it, courage can achieve nothing magnificent in war’, but concludes that such a course would be mistaken because ‘it is easier to exclude the forces of ruin than to govern them...for once they have established possession, they prove to be more powerful than their governor.’²⁸¹ Also, emotion can contribute to the formulation of unrealistic policies or cause military objectives to be set for which

²⁷⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 100.

²⁸⁰ Sherman, *Stoic Warriors*, p. 71.

²⁸¹ Seneca, ‘On Anger’, p. 25. Later he states that ‘there is nothing useful in anger, it does not whet the mind for deeds of war’ and ‘anger is useless, even in battle and war. With its wish to bring others into danger, it lowers its own guard. The surest courage is to look around long and hard, to govern oneself, to move slowly and deliberately forward’, p. 25 and 27.

the means do not exist. Emotional impulses can encourage the use of unrestrained force which may prove inimical to stated objectives, for instance in encouraging greater resistance from the enemy or by undermining popular support for a war.²⁸² Sometimes the emotional moral indignation of terrorist groups, such as witnessed in the case of the Red Army Faction, leads them to commit the same type of crimes (if not on the same scale), as those they condemn.²⁸³

Whilst Clausewitz would have sympathised with Seneca's injunctions, he often stresses the need for a delicate balance of emotions, not their complete suppression. This was particularly the case with his notion of genius, which he believed consisted of a mix of emotional qualities, tempered by a strong intellect, intuitive understanding, and presence of mind.²⁸⁴ This, in many respects, has more in common with Aristotle's famous discussion of virtue being built upon the prudent balancing of emotions in relation to differing circumstances. As Aristotle states in his *Ethics*: 'The man who gets angry at the right things and with the right people, and also in the right way and at the right time and for the right length of time, is commended.'²⁸⁵ Also, Seneca quotes Aristotle as stating that 'anger is needful; no fight can be won without it, without it filling the mind and kindling enthusiasm there.'²⁸⁶ This perhaps constitutes what we would today refer to as 'emotional intelligence': finding and maintaining the right balance between emotion and reason.²⁸⁷ In this sense, Clausewitz probably had more in

²⁸² A famous example would be the impact of the My Lai massacre of hundreds of unarmed civilians in South Vietnam by American forces in March 1968. Reports of the killings – including famous dispatches by Seymour Hirsch (who would go on to provide important reports on the similarly explosive Iraq Abu Ghraib scandal in 2004) – fuelled the anger of the anti-war movement and calls for withdrawal from Vietnam.

²⁸³ Also, the fact that, as revealed after German reunification, the RAF had been receiving funds from the East German Stasi secret police, which can be seen as the institutional arch-embodiment of the type of repressive, totalitarian abuses the RAF was supposedly fighting against. Aust, *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*, pp. 434-35. In the Preface to his study, Aust notes, 'Like many of their generation they had lined up to oppose the old style and what they thought was the new style, of fascism. They had tried to change that 'murderous world' by force, making themselves lords over life and death, and had ended up as guilty as many of their parents' generation', p. xix.

²⁸⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 115-31.

²⁸⁵ Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 160.

²⁸⁶ Seneca, 'On Anger', p. 27. As the editors note, there is no evidence of this quote in Aristotle's surviving works, therefore Seneca may be – perhaps inaccurately – putting words into his Aristotle's mouth.

²⁸⁷ Aristotle's conception of emotion was based on what Nancy Sherman explains as an 'appraisal theory.' This view holds that emotions are not purely feelings, but include judgements about one's situation, which associates them to a certain degree with reason. In this respect, emotions can be made to conform with reason – they 'can be expressed in ways that are apt and

common with Aristotle than a Stoic such as Seneca, but he certainly would have sympathised with the latter's warnings about the capacity for emotions such as rage and anger to 'sweep us on with a force of their own and allow no turning back.'²⁸⁸ Clausewitz himself urged restraint towards the French following the battle of Waterloo.

Also, for commanders in war, the intelligence required is not one simply of logical reason – 'principles and opinions can seldom reduce the path of reason to a simple line'²⁸⁹ – but one of emotional empathy and judgement that is capable of reading the likely emotional reactions of the enemy, his own forces, and those of other important parties. Emotion in war is thus something that is not only to be actively exploited or tamed, but also a force to be sensitively judged and perceived. The use of force impacts not only on those directly caught up in war – the combatants themselves – but also on various external actors, all of whom may act so as to greatly transform the political or military landscape. For instance, many conquerors have failed because they did not account for the intense emotional reaction of a people deprived of their liberty. Judging the likely reaction of various 'agglomerations of emotion' is an inherently difficult and complex matter, but those who attempt to understand their power and the myriad ways they impact on war stand a much better chance of success. These ideas might also relate to the individual soldier's effectiveness. In her book *Stoic Warriors*, Nancy Sherman advocates a 'moderate and mild stoicism'²⁹⁰ combining aspects of emotion and reason. She warns about the debilitating effects of rage and anger against which the Stoics propose *apatheia* and fighting without anger,²⁹¹ but Sherman also demonstrates how some forms of emotional anger should be cautiously embraced.²⁹²

Thus, this tendency of the trinity is – as noted with regard to the concept of friction in Chapter 5 – not something about which commanders should

appropriate.' Anger might be rational in certain circumstances. Sherman, *Stoic Warriors*, pp. 71-72.

²⁸⁸ Seneca, 'On Anger', p. 25. He states that, the enemy (anger) 'must be stopped at the very frontier; when he has invaded and rushed on the city gates, there is no 'limit' which his captives can make him accept', p. 26.

²⁸⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 250.

²⁹⁰ Sherman, *Stoic Warriors*, p. 12.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

²⁹² She also notes how attempts to control or bottle up anger and hatred might cause them to fester and turn toxic later, therefore controlled outlet of such feelings might be preferable. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

necessarily despair. The impact of emotions on war is ever-present, but strategically ambivalent and context dependent. The character and extent of their particular manifestations, whether in the political leadership, the fighting forces, or 'the people', will depend on prevailing conditions. It is for the statesman, the commander, and the soldier – in their respective spheres of competency – to read those conditions and to, at the opportune moment, seek to tap, promote, shape, control, or suppress all the various expressions of hate, anger, revenge, compassion, ambition, envy, pity, and love that war's human actors invariably display. Passion and irrationality are certainly forces that cannot be ignored or wished away.

Reflections

This tendency has its roots in human nature, and as such is an inescapable feature of human activity, yet one that is particularly apt to be displayed to its full in the dramatic, heated, and intense context of war. The use of force in human relations stirs emotions, the consequences of which can greatly impinge on the course of war. Those emotions can be understood in both an individualistic and collective sense. They are of a protean nature, capable of manifestation in many diverse forms, which history records in abundance. Passion is not necessarily manifested as a malign force, nor one causing a rise to extremes at all times (as often as this may be the case). Passion can equally be a force pushing against war, as embodied in powerful pacifist sentiment amongst sections of society today. Passion is a universal aspect of war, but is not necessarily always dominant. Also, the precise dynamics of passion may be hard to pin down, being as it is an intangible, largely ephemeral force. Nevertheless it is a very real element of war, particularly in its consequences, which are highly unpredictable and liable to violent fluctuations and intense expression.

If passion is not simply the enemy of sensible policy in relation to war, it is certainly a force the effects of which policy cannot escape and that sometimes the latter is hard put to control, as Seneca so lucidly warned. Those responsible for making policy must either seek to mitigate passion's worst strategic effects, cultivate its beneficial aspects, or harness its potential violent energy in a controlled fashion. Otherwise, hopeless missions will be launched, the bonds of

honour between both fellow soldiers and the enemy will wither, whilst the waves of hatred will sweep away the walls of sensible policy in a flood of massacre, savagery, and excess.

That concludes our analysis of the three primary tendencies. We are now in a position to provide a description of the trinitarian framework as whole, drawing together the analysis of the primary trinity with the secondary and contextual levels. This holistic focus will be the subject of the following chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Interactions: The Trinity as a Unity

There is a sequence about the creative process, and a work of genius is a synthesis of its individual features from which nothing can be subtracted without disaster.¹

Seneca

Lo, single things inwoven, made to blend,
To work in oneness with the whole...²

Goethe

The preceding chapters have examined the central elements of Clausewitz's theory. Now we have a clearer idea of the three separate primary elements that comprise the trinity, it is possible to consider how the trinity operates as a whole. This holistic perspective is crucial. Each separate tendency of the trinity does not stand-alone and so, the previous three chapters, which have treated each tendency in isolation, are largely meaningless until they are brought together and their intended dynamic unity emphasised. Certain valuable insights can be taken from an analysis of each, but only when the structure of the whole is understood does Clausewitz's conception of the nature of war become clear. Also, we must seek to understand how the primary tendencies relate, in theoretical terms, to the secondary trinity and war's multiple contexts at the tertiary level. These perspectives are crucial in order to provide a full description of the trinitarian framework; and one that can help lessen the potential for misinterpretation. Not until the powerful play of contextual conditions – explored in Chapter 3 – are fully incorporated does its timelessness become clear.

If the analysis of the separate tendencies appeared somewhat partial or incomplete this is to be expected. Also, it should have become apparent throughout this study that it is almost impossible to discuss one element without simultaneously considering the others: the true meaning of each tendency only

¹ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 79.

² Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part One* (London: Penguin, 1949), p. 46.

fully emerges when the trinity is brought together in its intended dynamic unity. It is often the failure to comprehend the whole, in all its complexity, that constitutes a major source of mistaken representations of Clausewitz's theory. This chapter seeks to elucidate the structure of the theory as a whole. It begins by considering the key commonalities of the three primary level tendencies. The chapter then moves on to explore the other levels of the trinity and to explain how these levels should be understood in relation to the whole framework. These levels have been touched on in previous chapters, but their conceptual place in the framework needs to be clarified. Following this, we will consider how the trinity must be conceived of as an integrative unity; the dynamic interaction between the three tendencies is emphasised. These points are then brought together by examining how modern scientific ideas of nonlinearity, complexity, and chaos provides powerful imagery that can significantly enhance our understanding of the operation of the trinity.

Prominent themes of analysis at the primary level

The analysis in the previous three chapters, regarding the separate primary tendencies of the trinity, reveals a number of central themes that can be said to characterise all three; by this we mean the common, generalisable attributes that pertain to each. It is important to recap these central issues as a basis for understanding how the trinity operates as a whole.

Unilateral and multilateral perspectives

The trinity essentially presents a picture of war from the perspective of one actor, one 'side', perhaps even an alliance in war. Thus, some have claimed that in order to gain a complete perspective of war we have to visualise what we might term a 'clash of trinities'; essentially the idea being that we need to bring together the separate trinities of each belligerent group and analyse their interaction. This approach is not without its merits, yet appears to be largely derived from conceptions of the trinity based at the secondary level (the people/army/government formula; which we will explore below) and fails to grasp the complexity inherent in the primary tendencies. The apparent problem

arises because, of course, opposing belligerents cannot share a common leadership or armed forces, and they will relate primarily to their own distinct populations, although an elision in the latter case might occur during insurgencies whereby both sides attempt to secure the allegiance of the same populace. Yet, when conceiving of the trinity from the primary level, as Clausewitz intended, it becomes clear that the interactive nature of war is already embodied in the trinity: a point that is not initially obvious.

In the case of each tendency, the analysis does not make sense without the existence of an 'other'. In each, unilateral perspectives are embedded, and crucially dependent in terms of their meaning and fundamental propositions, on a multilateral reality (by which we mean two or more entities in conflict). A purely unilateral perspective is certainly possible to a degree. So, policy can be independently formulated based on the aims of the group irrespective of what or who stands in the way of achieving them. Important elements of uncertainty and friction are generated internally³ or result from non-human external factors such as the weather. Also genius, creativity, and the imaginative application of available means can be directed toward lifeless objects. People can display violent emotions and passion not necessarily caused by or directed at someone or something else, and irrational thought and behaviour has internal origins. Yet, all these tendencies do not properly relate to war, or attain the specific form which Clausewitz intends, unless an enemy exists and force is a feature of the interactive relationship *between* human groups.

Policy is meaningless without consideration of the broader multilateral political context within which it is inextricably embedded, influenced by, and against which it reacts. In Clausewitz's work the two perspectives almost at times elide because he sees them as being so indissolubly interconnected. The course of any war is importantly shaped, not only by what one or the other side hopes to achieve through force, but by the complex interplay, tensions, and contortions created by such political interaction. Many of the most important aspects of chance and uncertainty derive from the interaction with other human social groups. War, as Clausewitz stressed, is not action against a lifeless mass

³ We have in mind here such factors as decision-making disputes, bureaucratic inertia, organisational disorganisation, distorting ethnocentric assumptions, poor training, limited experience, low morale, and so forth. Deficiencies in these areas may doom a military before it even faces the enemy.

or even against an unpredictable, yet controllable nature, but against a thinking, living, 'alert and sentient opponent, who seeks constantly to foil our plans.'⁴ The difficulties of accurately assessing the enemy's intentions and capabilities are exacerbated by the general unreliability of information and by the enemy's efforts at deception and surprise, and the simple fact of unpredictable happenings when two independent forces interact in complex, conflictual conditions. As Clausewitz notes, 'the very nature of interaction is bound to make it unpredictable.'⁵ Arguably the most important source of passion in war derives from the interactive use of force whereby – as so powerfully evinced on the Eastern Front during World War II – hostility breeds hostility, fear of the other heightens group solidarity inflamed by propaganda and dehumanising depictions of the opponent, and this situation breeds a spiral of hate bolstered by the memory of fallen men and the real and perceived brutalities of the enemy.

In these respects, all the tendencies draw upon, in differing but related ways, one of Clausewitz's ontological foundations of the trinity: war's interactive nature. None of the unilateral elements of the trinity make sense without an 'other' against which they attain meaning. The nature of war in the trinity is presented through the eyes of one actor, whilst simultaneously being embedded in and crucially dependent upon the inescapable context of interaction with other actors in conditions of violent conflict. As Bassford notes, war 'is never unilateral. It is a contest between independent wills, in which skill and creativity are no more important than personality, chance, emotion, and the various dynamics that characterise any human interaction.'⁶ The trinity is unilateral to the extent that it provides an avenue into an understanding of war from the angle of one political entity. The unilateral perspective is crucial for understanding war precisely because it is meaningless without being conceived of as being comprised of unitary actors who come together in a situation of conflicting interests. Thus, while it may appear contradictory to describe the trinity as comprehensive given its unitary appearance, in actual fact, once its

⁴ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 276.

⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 161.

⁶ Christopher Bassford, 'John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz', *War in History*, Vol. 1, No. 3, November 1994.

dependence on a multilateral conception is understood, the apparent contradictions fall away.

Ambiguity in relation to the rise to extremes

Extremes in war can take many forms. The Thirty Years War, the Napoleonic Wars, The Taiping Rebellion, and, in particular, the two World Wars would perhaps encapsulate what we would generally accept as real-world examples of wars that reached extremes – the designation of the latter two as ‘total wars’ reflects this understanding. World War II claimed over 50 million lives, was fought over most of the globe, involved countless unspeakable horrors (such as the Holocaust and massacres of unarmed civilians), and saw the strategic bombing and destruction of entire cities, with the loss not only of thousands of people, but also great works of architecture, art, and not to mention written texts, including some of Clausewitz’s work.⁷ Other than the imagined nuclear armageddon of a Third World War (after which, Einstein remarked, the Fourth will be waged with sticks and stones) there is no more obvious instance of the appalling extremes war can reach.

Yet, we need to tread cautiously in our understanding of extremes, which to a considerable extent depends on our situation or the perspective from which we are observing a particular war. Consider for instance the modern popular and misleading concept of ‘low-intensity warfare’ used to designate conflicts short of major state warfare. As Mike Smith shows, such descriptions can be misleading, when for instance, the Vietnam War becomes subsumed under such a heading: ‘it would be interesting to ask an American combat veteran whether he thought he was involved in a ‘low-intensity war’?’⁸ Just how extreme a conflict may be can be highly subjective and even the search for objective means of measurement may prove misleading. So, for instance, it is estimated that America dropped three times as many bombs on Vietnam than were dropped by all combatants

⁷ Although, throughout the war, attempts were made to avoid the destruction of some of the most historic cities, such as Rome.

⁸ Mike Smith, ‘Strategy in an Age of ‘Low Intensity’ Warfare’, in Isabelle Duyvesteyn and Jan Angstrom (eds.), *Rethinking the Nature of War* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 32.

during World War II.⁹ Indeed, Clausewitz's conception of extremes appears to have less to do with magnitude, scale, or statistics – although these may be inevitable consequences of extremes – and more to do with the character of the dynamics of the fighting.

Clausewitz – believing he had witnessed, in the Napoleonic campaigns, war which had ‘attained the absolute in violence’ – was keen to explain how extremes in war could be explained, as well as why in other wars they were not always reached. His description of the rise to extremes in Book 1, Chapter 1 is an abstract discussion which is part of a dialectical argument. Clausewitz concludes that whether a rise to extremes actually occurs can only be determined by war in reality, embedded in its real political, social, and physical contexts: it never simply follows the necessity of logical thought processes. This perspective is presented in the trinity, and, as it stands, is entirely ambiguous in relation to the rise to extremes. None of the three tendencies represent forces which if prevalent in a particular war will necessarily cause an escalation – they are *a priori* theoretically ambiguous in this respect. They *all* can lead to extremes, but equally they may exert countervailing and limiting forces. At the end of each of the preceding three chapters we noted the various ways in which this might occur, therefore we will not repeat the matter here.

Not only are the three tendencies individually ambiguous in this sense, but the extent to which they constitute one or the other is dependent on a host of contextual factors which shape their manifestation in any particular situation. Perhaps, given the weight of history, certain tendencies tend to gravitate more towards extremes – in particular, we might conclude that forces of passion and irrationality are generally more prone than others to cause extremes – but, nevertheless all are conditional and dependent on the particular case. We will generally observe great tension, both between and within the tendencies: some forces push war towards extremes, other exert a restraining influence. To acknowledge that each can, in certain ways, pull war away from extremes is enough to suggest the ambiguity of each and so, of the trinity as a whole. The trinity might usefully be conceived of as a ‘vehicle’, the direction of which is by

⁹ Anthony Best, Jussi H. Hanhimäki, Joseph A. Maiolo, and Kirsten E. Schulze, *International History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 294. As a result, South Vietnam became the most heavily bombed country in history. Jeremy Black, *Introduction to Global Military History: 1775 to the present day* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 187.

no means preordained and can only be understood once the specific driver is in and moving.

Strategically neutral

From a more subjective perspective, a close analysis of the elements of the trinity reveals their essentially neutral quality in subjective strategic terms. At first glance, for instance, it may appear that the tendency of chance and uncertainty – embodying as it does such concepts as friction and the fog of war – exerts an unambiguously negative and debilitating effect on strategic performance. This would be a mistaken conclusion. Whilst Clausewitz certainly wanted to reveal how, objectively, certain factors serve to impede all aspects of military activity (like movement in a resistant element), the strategic perspective reveals a different story. Precisely because friction and uncertainty are common to all belligerents, great advantages can accrue to those who are able to mitigate its worst effects – through inspired leadership, effective intelligence collection, the employment of new technologies, combat experience, courage, and high morale – and exacerbate it for the enemy – through surprise, deception, and misinformation. From the strategic perspective, the realm of chance and uncertainty is one of great opportunity, which people of great capability, creativity, and talent can exploit through bold acts, daring stratagems, or considered restraint.

Likewise, policy does not necessarily exert a positive or negative effect in terms of strategic performance. As in any purpose/means relationship, the purpose can exert a deleterious affect on achieving rational outcomes.¹⁰ The fact that Clausewitz believed war should be subject to control by policy, was not to say that policy is always wise or a positive strategic force. For instance, policy can be unclear, make unrealistic demands on the military, or the policy itself may be mistaken.¹¹ Political interests may impinge on military decision-making, the

¹⁰ Purpose does not exist as a static and ineluctably positive force in the relationship, but has to conduct a continuous dialogue with the means it chooses. If it does not, the potential for irrational outcomes will be high because the means may no longer match the scale of the object desired.

¹¹ As Clausewitz notes, policy can have an adverse affect if ‘statesman look to certain military moves and actions to produce effects that are foreign to their nature.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 735.

formulation of appropriate peacetime defence priorities, or the interpretation of intelligence, all of which may be inimical to strategic success. A common recent concern, linked to the possibilities created by new technologies, has been excessive and damaging political interference in military operations: the problem of the 'long screwdriver'.¹² On the other hand, sensible and reasoned policy can have a hugely positive impact on strategic effectiveness – in particular, clear objectives provide the military with a firm idea of the kind of military operations they need to undertake. In some cases, policy may have to restrain the military instrument to prevent an escalation of force which would be strategically damaging.

Lastly, passion is also neutral in its strategic implications. On the one hand, it can lead to wholly unrealistic policies or operations driven by excessive ambition, blinding religious conviction, or burning vengeance. Moral indignation and compassion might encourage humanitarian interventions which make little strategic sense.¹³ Emotion can encourage the prospect of hope in military situations where there is next to none. Passion can cause the overuse of force where the levels of civilian casualties or subsequent brutalities might turn important sections of opinion against the war. Hatred can blind decision-makers to strategic realities, and cause means to come detached from original political ends. But, as Clausewitz knew, such passions could be a most effective strategic asset if managed, channelled, and exploited effectively by commanders or political leaders. Also, he drew attention to other noble and positive emotions apparent in war, that serve to create bonds of comradeship amongst soldiers and engender heightened displays of altruism and self-sacrifice. Such cohesive forces within armed forces can greatly contribute to fighting effectiveness and ultimate strategic success, when so much in war, as Clausewitz stressed, is dependent on such psychological factors.

¹² See, for instance, Des Browne, 'Politics and the Art of War', Speech at Oxford University's 3rd annual lecture for the Oxford-Leverhulme programme on the 'Changing Character of War', 9 May 2007.

¹³ Colin S. Gray, 'The RMA and Intervention: A Sceptical View', in Colin McInnes and Nicholas J. Wheeler (eds.), *Dimensions in Western Military Intervention* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), pp. 52-65.

Context and implications at the secondary level

Although Clausewitz never employed the terms ‘secondary’ or ‘subjective’ in relation to the trinity they are useful ways of considering the level at which the primary trinity – politics, chance, and passion – is embodied or expressed in real-world actors or ‘subjects’. Jan Angstrom usefully describes the secondary level as the ‘operationalisation’¹⁴ of the primary trinity. The subjects Clausewitz identifies are, respectively, the government, the people, and the commander and his army. It is quite clear from the text that Clausewitz utilises this secondary trinity as an illustrative device to instantiate the more ephemeral forces he describes in the primary trinity through examples that would have made sense to his contemporaries and perhaps still do to us.¹⁵ Perhaps paradoxically, this attempt at clarification through illustration has contributed to a great deal of misunderstanding; yet this is misunderstanding derived from a failure to read Clausewitz carefully. Some modern commentators have sought to couple each tendency too rigidly to each of these social groups or simply ignore the primary trinity altogether. While, for instance, Angstrom is right to point out that his secondary trinity ‘was clearly influenced by the political and military context in which Clausewitz lived’¹⁶ this need not prevent us from seeking a more flexible interpretation, and certainly one that is not confined to the modern state.

A more flexible interpretation is facilitated by firmly recognising the place and role of context in the trinitarian framework. In Chapter 3 we argued that this ‘hidden’ level of the trinity is continually acting upon and within the social actors that conduct war (at the secondary level). As the various conditions within which war is fought change over time, actors who engage in war will inevitably be shaped by the prevailing circumstances which they themselves partly constitute. So, for instance, the cultural dimension of context will shape a group’s leadership form and its policy goals, the character of its fighting forces and the creative means it employs in pursuit of those goals, and the attributes of the population and the way it responds to developments prior to and during war.

¹⁴ Jan Angstrom, ‘Introduction: Debating the nature of modern war’, in Duyvesteyn and Angstrom, *Rethinking the Nature of War*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Christopher Bassford and Edward J. Villacres, ‘Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity’, *Parameters*, Autumn, 1995. Available online at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Trinity/TRININTR.htm>>, retrieved 18 January 2007.

¹⁶ Angstrom, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

Emphasising the importance of context was Clausewitz's central means of overcoming the apparent dichotomy between the universal and particular, change and continuity in war. When we acknowledge the ever-present influence of context we see how there is a constant dialogue up and down the three levels of the trinity. The primary level of the trinity distils those timeless elements of war which are manifested in a multitude of disparate and varied actors throughout history. Those actors conduct their own particular character and form of war (secondary level) moulded by changing social, cultural, political, technological, geographical, and economic conditions (tertiary, contextual level). It is a framework that reveals the universals in war – elements that always pertain to the phenomenon – whilst allowing for great and permanent change.

The trinity and the state

In an important article written in 1995 Christopher Bassford and Edward Villacres made clear how a number of studies had employed the 'trinity' in an incorrect sense. As they noted, the proclivity to mistakenly describe the Clausewitzian trinity as comprised of the government, the military, and the people was evident in the work of commentators both supportive and critical of Clausewitz's ideas.¹⁷ Unfortunately, there has been no let-up in such studies adopting the government-military-people construct and presenting it as the essence of Clausewitz's trinity. This particular representation of the secondary level is indeed a theoretical trinity, and one that can be of great value, but it is not ultimately a *Clausewitzian* trinity.

The apparent source of such interpretations appears to have been the highly influential book written by Harry Summers in 1982, which was a lucid and penetrating critique of the American Army's experience in Vietnam.¹⁸ Summers's analysis benefited greatly from his use of the government-military-people distinctions as it allowed him to explore some of the important ways in which relations between these social entities broke down during the war. Summers's work presented a conception of the trinity that was tied to the modern

¹⁷ Bassford and Villacres, 'Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity'.

¹⁸ Harry Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Hawaii: University Press of the Pacific, 2003).

state and its prominent social institutions, and this conception caught on in popular interpretations of the trinity. In particular, when Creveld and Keegan embarked on their extensive critiques of Clausewitz's ideas, they did so almost solely on the basis of a derivative conception of the trinity confined to the secondary level and, again, to the modern state.

Similarly, these were highly influential books that caught the imagination of many at the time and further consolidated the view that the secondary, people-army-government trinity represented *the* Clausewitzian trinity. Creveld's observations on the apparent demise of the state and the rise of forms of war in which the distinction between, for instance, the people and the military became almost meaningless appeared to be supported by events in the early 1990s, and thus lent his analysis credibility and with it his rejection of Clausewitz. This argument that Clausewitz is historically limited because, both in the past and increasingly today, war was not sociologically delineated according to recognisable bodies of government, military, and people betrays these authors' reliance on the secondary trinity, but also overstates the extent to which these divisions pertained in Clausewitz's time and the emphasis he placed on them in his theory. Whether Creveld was right to announce the imminent demise of the state¹⁹ is an argument we will consider below, but it is sufficient to note that these studies influenced further generations of scholars who adopted this portrayal of Clausewitz's trinity.

Thus, for many, *On War* became synonymous with old forms of state war and, so, as internecine, non-state warfare became seemingly more prevalent after 1989 this entailed that Clausewitz had to be discarded and new approaches unveiled. So Kaldor could state that, 'As the centralized, territorialized modern state gives way to new types of polity emerging out of new global processes, so war, as we presently conceived it [through Clausewitz], is becoming an anachronism.'²⁰ Much of the analysis contained in such works is of great value for students attempting to come to grips with the complexity of modern conflicts, but the interpretations of Clausewitz on which they proceed are at best, shaky, and at worst, wholly inaccurate. Instead of returning to and exploring the

¹⁹ Martin van Creveld, 'The Fate of the State', *Parameters*, Spring 1996, pp. 4-18.

²⁰ Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), p. 15.

implications of the primary trinity itself, they appear to base their interpretations on the secondary trinity alone which significantly denies the flexibility, wider applicability, and relevance of Clausewitz's theory.

When Clausewitz wrote *On War* he no doubt had the modern state and its wars at the forefront of his mind and this was to be expected: one of the most noticeable features of the history of the few centuries prior to Clausewitz's era was the unstoppable rise and consolidation of the modern state – primarily through its war-making capability – as the pre-eminent form of social organisation, particularly in Europe.²¹ But, Clausewitz's conception of war is far more flexible than some commentators presume and can comfortably accommodate political entities other than the state. Kaldor is mistaken to confidently assert that Clausewitz's definition 'implied that 'we' and 'our opponent' were states, and the 'will' of one state could be clearly defined. Hence war...is war between states for a definable political end, i.e. state interest.'²² As Echevarria notes, 'his example of the Tartar tribes illustrates the case for nonstates, and puts paid to the mistaken notion that Clausewitz thought only in terms of the nationstate model.'²³ The central point here is that political relationships between organised armed groups do not suddenly cease because the state is not involved. It is surely mistaken to claim that contests over relative power between self-interested groups disappears when the state is not at the centre of the confrontation. Even a prominent critic of Clausewitz accepts that the trinity is 'easily adaptable to forms of warring social organizations that do not form states.'²⁴

Yet, regardless of the fact that critics were aiming at an illusory target, we might well question just how limited the state conception actually is. The dominant and principal agent in world politics today is the state and we might well argue that prognostications of the demise of the state are perhaps far too hasty. It appears that, as Isabelle Duyvesteyn has convincingly argued (despite

²¹ Michael Howard, *The Causes of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), War in the Making and Unmaking of Europe, pp. 151-68.

²² Kaldor, *Old and New Wars*, p. 15.

²³ Antulio J. Echevarria II, *Clausewitz and Contemporary War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 89.

²⁴ Jan Willem Honig, 'Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting', in Gert de Nooy (ed.), *The Clausewitzian Dictum and the Future of Western Military Strategy* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997), p. 110.

weaknesses in her own interpretation of Clausewitz),²⁵ commentators such as Kaldor and Creveld have adopted somewhat mistaken perspectives on some of the conflicts which emerged during the 1990s. Whilst they are certainly correct to note the modern prevalence of intra-state conflict, Duyvesteyn's analysis – focusing primarily on African conflicts – has revealed that most of those wars (often taken as evidence of the demise of the state) were actually more often than not explicitly *about* the state: belligerents fought in order to wrest control of the state.²⁶ Also, as McInnes has noted, Creveld's belief that interstate conflicts are in decline is mistaken given that historically they have been rare events, whilst their ratio in relation to intrastate wars has been relatively stable for some time preceding the end of the Cold War.²⁷ Nevertheless, again, the trinity is not dependent on the state perspective, although this is perhaps its most potent manifestation. As Gray remarks, 'Recognizable 'war' predated, and will postdate, the modern states' system.'²⁸

Secondary level analogues

So, the association of the trinity with the modern state was derived largely from a misreading of the secondary level in terms of both its purpose and its place in Clausewitz's theory (regardless of whether this misreading was wilful or otherwise). A theory which focuses on the government, army, and people is naturally associated with the state, and precludes examination of many other forms of conflict. Three central arguments need to be presented in response to this mistaken conception. In a broad sense, as we have argued, Clausewitz was aware of wars that were not fought by modern states. Second, the secondary trinity as an illustrative device should not be confused with the central primary

²⁵ Her conception of Clausewitz is almost entirely confined to the secondary level, which as with Summers's study certainly benefits her analysis, but in the process somewhat distorts Clausewitz's true meaning. Duyvesteyn, on the first page, notes that according to Clausewitz's trinity, 'War...was made up of three elements: the government, the army and the people.' Isabelle Duyvesteyn, *Clausewitz and African War: Politics and Strategy in Liberia and Somalia* (London: Frank Cass, 2005), p. 1.

²⁶ 'Concerning the interests of these actors, it has been found that actors involved in armed conflict in which the state structures have collapsed fight for political interests, which are achieved by control over the state.' Ibid., p. 108.

²⁷ Colin McInnes, *Spectator-Sport Warfare: The West and Contemporary Conflict* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 58.

²⁸ Colin S. Gray, 'Clausewitz rules, OK? The future is the past – with GPS', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, 1999, p. 169.

trinity. Third, accepting these two arguments, it is not difficult to conceive of 'analogues' of the three secondary subjects. We will focus on the third of these points here.

Whatever the complexity of any war, analogues of the secondary trinity will be apparent in some shape or form, even if its precise character is difficult to determine: reality is often undeniably messy and complex. Sometimes, however, the delineations may be fairly clear (for instance war between distinct political entities such as modern states, with government decision-making executives and professional armed forces clearly separated from the wider population). In such cases, the people, army, government construct may be perfectly applicable (with qualification, as rarely are the distinctions so neat, even in Clausewitz's day: consider, for instance, the blurring of the people and army in the Spanish War). The secondary subjective trinity can appear greatly differentiated and adopt many potential forms, but war cannot make sense without some grasp of the basic groups that conduct it or impact upon its course.

Bassford has convincingly argued that the use of more inclusive terms might help avoid misinterpretations. He suggests a more appropriate term for the 'government' might be 'leadership'; 'fighters' might usefully replace 'commander and army'; and 'popular base' can substitute for 'the people'.²⁹ Gow alternatively suggests 'political leadership, armed force and political community'.³⁰ (The precise terms we use to emphasise the inclusivity of these groups is not a matter of great concern). This approach is to be welcomed as it is likely that analogues of these three broad groups will be evident in most instances of armed conflict. As Honig states, 'Any community will have its leaders, fighters and common people.'³¹ Even terrorist groups generally have a designated leadership responsible for setting the political direction of the group, they have designated operatives for conducting attacks (often led by operational commanders), whilst the group recruits from and attempts to influence certain segments of society (however small). Proceeding from the primary definitions we should seek to identify those sections of society most associated with the

²⁹ Bassford, 'Primacy of Policy', p. 82.

³⁰ James Gow, 'The New Clausewitz? War, Force, Art and Utility – Rupert Smith on 21st Century Strategy, Operations and Tactics in a Comprehensive Context', *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 6, December 2006, p. 1168.

³¹ Honig, 'Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting', p. 110.

types of forces being described in the particular case. Most importantly, we simply want to stress that the secondary level does not present a rigid or fixed sociological description of war in reality: as war's contexts change, so too will it. Clausewitz's conception of war's subordination to policy, for instance, is applicable to any form of political entity which establishes goals and possesses the means to employ violence to attain its ends.

'Mainly' – translation between the primary and secondary levels

Aside from problems stemming from the rigid sociological state-centric conception of the trinity, another connected problem at the secondary level relates to the way in which the primary tendencies translate or correspond to the secondary level. In the previous three chapters we analysed each tendency of the primary trinity, and in doing so we revealed the way in which the fundamental forces described cross many of the institutional boundaries illustrated by Clausewitz at the secondary subjective level. This has often been overlooked and rather a strict correlation proposed. So, for instance, passion is associated solely with the people (or its analogue). Misinterpretation of this point has stemmed from a too literal reading of the second paragraph of the trinity, whilst ignoring the enormous implications of one word in the second paragraph of Section 28: 'mainly' or 'mostly' (depending on the translation used). Clausewitz states – in relation to the primary tendencies of passion, chance and politics – that, 'The first of these three aspects *mainly* concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government.'³² We therefore need to break out of these mental confines in order to understand the continued relevance and value of the concept in our comprehension of war.

Again, this does not mean that the people, army, government formula will no longer apply in certain circumstances – indeed, it may often be highly applicable – but rather our conception of the trinity at the secondary level must be highly inclusive and subservient to the primary meaning and the circumstances of the particular events being studied. If we determine that the 'people, army, government' formula is relevant or correct in a concrete case, that

³² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman's Library, 1993), p. 101.

should only be because our analysis of a particular war revealed the primary tendencies of the trinity operating along the lines of such social distinctions (as Clausewitz concluded they broadly did in his day).

How the trinity should be understood in this respect is made clear by Bassford and Villacres when they state that the secondary delineations should not be viewed as fixed attributes because ‘each of the three [primary] categories...affects all of these human actors to some quite variable extent.’³³ As Clausewitz stressed, the trinity morphs in its subjective manifestation in different times and places because war is ‘more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case.’³⁴ Let us briefly return to the elements of the primary trinity to remind ourselves of how they can cross the sociological divides of people, army, and government (or their more inclusive analogues).

Clausewitz associated the primary tendency of war’s subordination to policy mainly with the secondary social actor of the government. This was for him a quite natural association and certainly still makes sense today, yet it is not difficult to conceive of a more inclusive conception of the types of actors this tendency relates to. Simply associating the primary tendency of policy with the single social entity of the government (or leadership) is patently insufficient, if perhaps entirely appropriate in some cases. In a way not fully apparent to Clausewitz, the spread of democratisation during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has greatly expanded the role of the people in policy formulation, both in directly shaping it and as a factor governments must account for in decisions over the use of force. We should also note the important role the military often plays in shaping policy choices, sometimes actually usurping the reigns of power.³⁵ Also, the extent to which this tendency relates to other actors in war is revealed when one fully grasps the importance of the conception of war as a continuation of politics, as emphasised in Chapter 4. All actions in war (even at the lowest levels) have the potential to impact on political power dynamics in their various forms (consider, for instance, the massive political fallout from Abu Ghraib resulting from the actions of individual soldiers; even if they took place in an overarching context whereby senior members of the administration, such as

³³ Bassford and Villacres, ‘Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity’.

³⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 101.

³⁵ See Hew Strachan, ‘the military in politics’, in Richard Holmes (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 723-30.

the Attorney General Gonzalez, believed the new 'war on terror' meant some of the provisions of the Geneva Conventions were 'rendered quaint').³⁶ The idea of individual soldiers being invested with considerable potential political importance is conveyed in the notion of the 'strategic corporal' which has emerged in recent years.³⁷

In many respects it is was quite right for Clausewitz to associate chance, uncertainty, and genius most closely with the military sphere of the commander and his army. However, it is clear that the relevance of this tendency at the secondary level pertains significantly to other social groups. Clausewitz emphasises the idea that uncertainty is a major consequence of the nature of politics: 'In making war, policy evades all rigorous conclusions proceeding from the nature of war, bothers little about ultimate possibilities, and concerns itself only with immediate probabilities. Although this introduces a high degree of uncertainty into the whole business, turning it into a kind of game, each government is confident that it can outdo its opponent in skill and acumen.'³⁸ This point is made by Booth who states that, 'political behaviour is such a contingent activity that prediction can never be a science.'³⁹ For Clausewitz, war as an act of policy is in many respects a chance undertaking, something of a gamble beyond the bounds of purely rational control in which natural judgement and intuition are more appropriate than logical reason. Also, from an objective perspective, the multilateral political context is one of the prime causes of the unpredictability of war: the consequence of the dynamic interaction of independent political units, each with their own variable objectives.

³⁶ See Philippe Sands, *Lawless World: Making and Breaking Global Rules* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 154.

³⁷ See Charles C. Krulak, 'The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War', *Marines Magazine*, January 1999. Available online at:

<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm>, retrieved 3 June 2007.

Krulak notes that, 'The inescapable lesson of Somalia and of other recent operations, whether humanitarian assistance, peace-keeping, or traditional warfighting, is that their outcome may hinge on decisions made by small unit leaders, and by actions taken at the *lowest* level. Success or failure will rest, increasingly, with the rifleman and with his ability to make the *right* decision at the *right* time at the point of contact...In order to succeed under such demanding conditions they will require unwavering maturity, judgment, and strength of character. Most importantly, these missions will require them to confidently make well-reasoned and *independent* decisions under extreme stress – decisions that will likely be subject to the harsh scrutiny of both the media and the court of public opinion....[They often] will be the most conspicuous symbol of American foreign policy and will potentially influence not only the immediate tactical situation, but the operational and strategic levels as well.'

³⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 732.

³⁹ Ken Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), p. 59.

That a broader conception of this tendency at the secondary level of the trinity is required is evident when one considers the multidimensional and complex character of the modern battlespace, where overcoming chance and the use of creative talent is increasingly the preserve of actors other than simply the commander and his army. A wide array of organisations, NGOs, aid agencies, reconstruction teams, diplomats, and so on, all have a vital part to play in shaping political and military outcomes during and after conflict.⁴⁰ This is particularly the case in so-called ‘people’s wars’, insurgencies, humanitarian interventions, and post-conflict reconstruction operations, in which securing the support and allegiance of populations to the legitimate state authority is often more crucial than purely ‘kinetic’ military operations against the enemy.

In his description of the trinity Clausewitz states that passion ‘mainly concerns the people’ because ‘the passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people.’⁴¹ As demonstrated extensively in Chapter 6, this association masks the extent to which the military and the political leadership are implicated in this tendency’s meaning. Those responsible for formulating policy are as susceptible to being motivated by driving ambition, religious dogmatism, or ideological fanaticism. Military commanders, soldiers, and combatants of all descriptions are wont to be swept away in the heat of battle by feelings of fear, revenge, anger, and hatred. Yet, also the powerful, altruistic emotional bonds formed between comrades on the battlefield are a notable feature of most military institutions through history.

The essential point of this section has been to reveal that the forces in the primary trinity operate regardless of the character of belligerents. Their manifestation will vary greatly at the secondary level, but their essence, their spirit, will remain the same. Their embodiment will generally translate into the form of analogues of the Clausewitzian secondary trinity (political leadership, fighting forces, and people) but allowing for great differences in actual form in different cases. Also, again, the primary forces cross the divides of these delineations. So, for instance, a small terrorist cell (with no clear sociological

⁴⁰ See M. J. Williams, ‘The Coming Revolution in foreign affairs: rethinking American national security’, *International Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 6, November 2008, pp. 1109-1129. See also R. D. Hooker, ‘Beyond *Vom Kriege*: The Character and Conduct of Modern War’, *Parameters*, Summer 2005, p. 11. This is also a central argument in Smith’s *The Utility of Force*.

⁴¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 101.

divisions between leadership, fighters, or people) would be just as susceptible to all the primary forces. A similar point applies to leaders who combine both political and military roles, such as Alexander, Frederick the Great, or Napoleon. It is for analysts and strategists to correctly identify the character and dynamics of the social institutions engaged in war at any one time and to contemplate how the elements of policy, chance, and passion express themselves in the particular case. Clausewitz simply provided us with the framework to begin such an analysis. Open interpretations, mindful of the emphasis placed on contextual factors, can comfortably accommodate the vast range of groups that have conducted war throughout the ages.

The trinity as an integrative and dynamic unity

As Paret states, Clausewitz believed that ‘war was an activity in which each aspect influences and is influenced by others, and this interrelationship extended to the social and political matrix of war.’⁴² In Chapter 5, Book 2 Clausewitz states that ‘in war, as in life generally, all parts of a whole are interconnected.’⁴³ The trinity is intended to reflect precisely this idea. The trinity is a unity and therefore must be comprehended as such. Importantly, this does not mean that the trinity is simply a combination of three elements placed side by side. The whole is not simply the representation of three important aspects of war viewed together or simultaneously. The theory is more complex than this and reflects the incredible complexity of war in reality: no such neat divisions of the phenomenon would suffice.

It might be assumed from a basic presentation of the trinity that Clausewitz viewed war as a straightforward, ordered, and structured activity; the three prominent elements of which can neatly be assessed independently. This interpretation is only further encouraged by a mistaken concentration on the secondary elements of the trinity (people, army, and government) which suggests war displays a clear sociological division and that the relationships between these groups forms the basis for analysis of war’s nature. This, as Alan Beyerchen has

⁴² Peter Paret, *Clausewitz and the State: The Man, His Theories, and His Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 189.

⁴³ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 184.

demonstrated would be a misleading reading of the trinity because ‘the drive to comprehend the world through analysis, the effort to partition off pieces of the universe to make them amenable to study, opens the possibility of being blind-sided by the very artificiality of the partitioning practice.’⁴⁴ Clausewitz certainly partitioned reality this way in his trinity, but importantly he wanted to stress that this was an artificial exercise and, as explained in the paragraphs following the substantive description of the trinity, one that masks incredible variation, interconnectedness, and dynamism in reality.

A deeper exploration certainly reveals that the tendencies cannot be isolated in any neat manner – the boundaries between them are indistinct. Rather, central to Clausewitz’s conception was the idea that ‘the nature of war is complex and changeable.’⁴⁵ As Strachan has noted in his ‘biography’ of *On War*, ‘Unlike many of the other triads which litter *On War*...this trinity really is three elements united into one.’⁴⁶ The importance of a theory capable of portraying this idea is evident in Clausewitz’s early notes, such as in his preface to an early theoretical treatise written between 1816 and 1818, which states that his aim is to ‘investigate the essence of the phenomena of war and to indicate the links between these phenomena and the nature of their component parts.’⁴⁷ In the same piece, and at around the time when Clausewitz began to write what would become *On War*, Clausewitz expressed this desire for a unifying theory (written in the third person):

Years of thinking about war, much association with able men who knew war, and a good deal of personal experience with it, have left certain ideas and convictions, and these he has preferred to present in compressed form, like small nuggets of pure metal...Perhaps a greater mind will soon appear to replace the individual nuggets with a single whole, cast of solid metal, free from all impurity.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Alan Beyerchen, ‘Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery’. Available online at: <<http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Beyerchen/BeyerschenNonlinearity2.pdf>>, retrieved 20 April 2007.

⁴⁵ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 102.

⁴⁶ Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz’s On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), p. 178.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought: From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 195.

⁴⁸ Clausewitz, ‘Authors Preface’, in *On War*, p. 70.

Absent any other 'greater mind' it was left to Clausewitz himself to attempt such a grand theoretical amalgam. The same desire is stated at the outset of *On War*: 'I propose to consider first the various elements of the subject, next its various parts or sections, and finally the whole in its internal structure.'⁴⁹ That whole is represented in the trinity, and there are a number of vital points that need to be explained in order to comprehend the trinity holistically, as a unity, as an integrative and complete concept.

The idea of the search for the unity of phenomena is clearly evident in the culture of the German Movement. Its philosophical embodiment – that of German Idealism – was a powerful and dominant force at the time Clausewitz thought and wrote, having being established by Fichte and Schelling, based upon the Kantian agenda, and elaborated by Schiller, and consolidated in the work of that 'most powerful of the German idealists,'⁵⁰ Hegel. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the idealists emphasised the 'integrative interrelation of all phenomena.'⁵¹ Karl Ameriks describes how the idealists held that philosophy should be a deeply unified and autonomous enterprise, which ambitiously seeks to identify the structures that allow for a general and systematic account of 'how all experience, history, and nature hang together.'⁵² Common to most idealist thinkers – in particular Fichte and Hegel – was a dialectical mode of reasoning, employed to transcend apparent contradictions and arrive at 'synthesis', based on the notion that through overcoming the oppositions inherent in concepts we can ascend to a more accurate understanding of reality. The trinity, although not strictly Hegelian, can be seen as the theoretical means of expressing the unity of the phenomenon of war – Clausewitz's 'final synthesis' – which he arrived at after conducting an extensive dialectical consideration of its central components. As Gat notes, whilst many of the ideas were in place to affect the resolution of the various inconsistencies in his theory, it was not until 1827, and the height of Hegel's influence in Berlin, that Clausewitz truly realised how best to proceed. Following idealist philosophy, in which all 'contradictions of reality were

⁴⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 83.

⁵⁰ Roger Scruton, *A Short History of Modern Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 168.

⁵¹ Paret, *Clausewitz and the State*, p. 150.

⁵² Karl Ameriks, 'Introduction: interpreting German Idealism', in Karl Ameriks (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 4-10.

actually but differing aspects of a single whole'⁵³ he was able to expose war in its totality.

Importantly, all three aspects of the trinity serve to help define the others. None of them exist independently and all are in continual tension and interaction with one another: no single tendency has full meaning apart from the others and no one tendency can be excluded at any point in time. As Clausewitz states, a theory which attempted to 'fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless.'⁵⁴ Their relationship to one another is by no means static, rather their relationship is one of dynamic interaction and variation over time. The extent to which any one tendency is manifest at any one time can vary greatly, but none are ever completely absent.

It is vital to stress this point in relation to secondary trinity. Even if we conclude that in a certain war, the people are almost completely absent (as has been argued was largely the case in the 'cabinet wars' of the eighteenth century), this does not imply that passion and emotion will be too. This is because, as explained above, the primary tendencies are not exclusive to the groups with which Clausewitz 'mainly' identified them. Passion will be observable in both the leadership and the military in various ways and to varying extents. This is little more than a common-sense observation, but one that is apparently denied by commentators who adhere to rigid, parochial, and unrealistic interpretations of Clausewitz.

So, each tendency serves in some ways to define the limits of the others. For instance, policy, as representative of rational and goal-directed behaviour in war, cannot be understood alone: war is also pervaded by great chance, uncertainty, unpredictability, and friction, whilst inescapable primary emotions impact on behaviour. In this way, whilst still an important element of war, the limits of rationality are exposed by accepting the simultaneous play of such forces. In this respect, policy is hard put to maintain its control over its instrument because effectively linking means and ends is hampered by the play of chance events, uncertainty derived from psychological effects, and the intervention of blinding passion in the heat of conflict. Equally, however, the

⁵³ Gat, *Military Thought*, p. 234.

⁵⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 101.

tendencies are not necessarily always in *competition* with one another, but can be mutually supportive or beneficially intertwined. So, effective policy may be supported by empathetic understanding, creative imagination, or intuitive judgement, combat effectiveness enhanced by rage and anger, and military genius composed of a subtle blend of intellect and temperament. This holistic perspective of course gives the lie to characterisations of Clausewitz as a ‘pure rationalist’ and underlines the importance of understanding *On War* first and foremost through the trinity, for it is the only point at which all his central ideas find their true force as a complex unity. No idea (not even his famous dictum ‘war is nothing but a continuation of politics’) can be understood entirely independently or as independently superior.

So, we need to understand the inner workings, and characteristics of the interaction between the three separate elements and emphasise the way in which they can have varying levels of influence in different wars to the extent that certain tendencies almost, at times, efface the others. From one war to the next, and within the same war, the individual tendencies will vary in their relative influence and importance. For instance, at times, political factors will be to the fore, whilst passion is less apparent, or at other times the chance and uncertainty of the military encounter suffused with myriad emotions will dominate, while the influence of policy is seemingly effaced. In some cases, all three may be strongly apparent. The point is to stress the infinite possibilities involved. This *dynamic variable interplay* determines the specific characteristics of any war and helps us explain why certain wars appear to display varying magnitudes of the individual tendencies. As Bassford has pointed out the trinity conveys dynamism not balance or equilibrium.⁵⁵ The tendencies are in a continuous fluctuating, unstable, and shifting relationship and, ‘No one of these three elements is continually dominant, not even policy.’⁵⁶ As Echevarria puts it, none of the tendencies ‘are a priori more influential in determining the shape and course of actual conflict than any other.’⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Christopher Bassford, ‘The Primacy of Policy and the ‘Trinity’ in Clausewitz’s Mature Thought’, in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 81.

⁵⁶ Strachan, *Biography*, p. 178.

⁵⁷ Echevarria, *Clausewitz*, p. 73.

Imagining the trinity – nonlinearity, complexity, and chaos

Drawing together these strands of analysis it is useful to draw upon the insights and imagery of modern scientific nonlinearity and complexity theory in order to express the nature of the operation of war as encapsulated in the trinity. This is a perspective that has been encouraged principally by Alan Beyerchen, who has stressed the importance of metaphor for understanding the concepts Clausewitz employs. He describes the trinity as a ‘striking metaphor of nonlinearity’⁵⁸ and as Christopher Bassford notes, the trinity is a ‘classic model of Chaos, in the modern scientific sense.’⁵⁹ So what ideas does the science of nonlinearity convey?

Essentially, it relates to complex, interactive, and open systems, constitutive of many interacting variables, rather than of selective or simplistic relationships between a handful. Such systems display nonrecurring patterns of behaviour, and which are highly sensitive to the tiniest alterations in initial conditions. Slight changes in some variables can have wholly disproportionate effects leading to radically divergent outcomes. The overall result is a system typified by unpredictability, randomness, and complexity.

The trinity in its basic form – perhaps reduced to such memorable formulas as ‘politics, chance, and passion’ – can be extremely misleading for the student of war. We have already noted some of the reasons for this, such as the fact that each single tendency carries within it the weight of a great deal of theorising, detailed analysis, and subsidiary concepts. Moreover, the image of the trinity provided by Clausewitz is ‘not one of any kind of Euclidean triangle or triad, despite its understanding as such by many readers’⁶⁰ and as misleadingly presented by a number of commentators.⁶¹ This is precisely where the imagery provided by contemporary science of nonlinearity can be of value. It presents us with means of grasping the intended dynamism of the relationship between the tendencies and of the operation of the trinity as a whole.

⁵⁸ Beyerchen, ‘Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery’.

⁵⁹ Bassford, ‘Primacy of Policy’, p. 81.

⁶⁰ Beyerchen, ‘unpredictability’, p. 70.

⁶¹ It is for these reasons that this study has resisted employing any diagrammatical representations of the trinity. For instance of authors employing stylised diagrammatical models of the trinity, see Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); id., *War, Strategy and Intelligence* (London: Routledge, 1989); and Janeen Klinger. ‘The Social Science of Carl von Clausewitz’, *Parameters*, Spring 2006, pp. 86-87.

Immediately after presenting the substantive content of the trinity, Clausewitz notes that (in Bassford's translation) the 'task, therefore, is to keep our theory [of war] floating among these three tendencies, as among three points of attraction.'⁶² As Beyerchen explains, 'when a magnet is released over three equidistant and equally powerful magnets, it moves irresolutely to and fro as it darts among the competing points of attraction.'⁶³ It is in this manner that war will chart a complex and unpredictable course amongst these three 'points of attraction.' Even though we may be able to anticipate the 'overall kind of pattern', any sort of 'quantitative predictability of the actual trajectory' of any war is impossible because even infinitely small variations in initial conditions can cause a 'significantly different pattern.' War cannot be isolated from all possible influences (like the magnet can't be isolated from the friction of the mounts and air). It is an open system sensitive to differences in initial conditions and external influences, which will affect the course the magnet charts between the various tendencies.⁶⁴

This analogy with the non-linear phenomenon of the magnet certainly captures the incredible complexity of many wars, where there may be multiple actors interacting in shifting combinations. Such complexity can seriously hamper attempts at any neat analysis. Nevertheless, the trinity was designed by Clausewitz with such complexity in mind – a fact which belies its seeming simplicity. It is the actual application of the trinity in the concrete case which remains the challenge for historians, analysts, and strategists. The relevance of the ideas of complexity theory might be particularly pertinent to many modern conflicts given the vast array of actors involved, operating in a globalised context, with the vast and confusing transnational political webs created as a result. This is combined with the unpredictable and intangible effects of an ever-present mass media, which filters perceptions and shapes and is shaped by popular attitudes. A growing complex of international legal constraints, national 'rules of engagement', military codes and diverse ethical preconceptions blurs the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in conflict. The proliferation of myriad futuristic technologies and high-tech weapons systems,

⁶² Bassford, 'Primacy of Policy', p. 77.

⁶³ Beyerchen, 'unpredictability', p. 70.

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 69-70.

require constant adaptation by combatants to this rapidly shifting material environment.

It should be noted that these insights do not amount to a cause for despair, either for the commander or for the student of war. Nor is the use of the imagery of complexity theory meant to suggest that in war all is actually chaos: there are of course some prominent linearities and predictable elements in war, such as the effect certain weapons will have when they hit their target. The acceptance of the complexity of war is simply a further step towards properly understanding the phenomenon under study. The trinity is an important means of feeling our way through that complexity. It condenses an enormously difficult subject into manageable elements that, if grasped, can greatly enhance knowledge on war and strategy. Moreover, the benefits of such nonlinear imagery in the strategic realm might be to encourage the vital attributes of adaptability, flexibility, responsiveness, and innovation in military institutions.

The failure to conceive of the trinity in this way may reflect a natural human inclination for the reassuring presence of structure, order, and predictability in human social affairs – something likely to be sought in military establishments as neat models promise prediction and greater control over intractable situations pervaded by fear and apprehension. As Steven Mann has argued, ‘our view of reality rests on scientific paradigms’ and the dominant outlook is shaped by the physical sciences developed during the eighteenth century, with their emphasis on deterministic and linear sequences of cause and effect.⁶⁵ Undoubtedly, Clausewitz’s theory, as we have seen, employs terminology from the physical sciences (centre of gravity, friction etc). But, ‘linear systems are often restrictive, narrow and brittle’⁶⁶ and can cause serious paralysis and confusion when developments and events do not fit neatly into the existing model. Beyerchen neatly sums up the potential weakness of linear conceptions of war and is worth quoting at length:

We need for our own sake to understand the limitations our imaginations places upon us. Linearity is excellent for the systems we design to behave predictably, but offers a narrow window on most natural and social systems. That narrowness sets blinders on our perception of reality

⁶⁵ Mann, Steven, ‘Chaos Theory and Strategic Thought’, *Parameters*, Autumn 1992, pp. 54-55.

⁶⁶ Beyerchen, ‘Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery’.

and offers a weakness for an opponent to exploit. But if we know our limits, we can maximise the extent and duration of our surprise... And an expanded sense of the complexity of reality can help us be more successfully adaptive amid changing circumstances.⁶⁷

The trinity, in its basic form, potentially misconveys the enormous complexity of the ideas and concepts that it rests upon. To paraphrase Clausewitz: everything in the theory of war is very simple, but the simplest thing is incredibly complex. It would be very easy to fall into the trap of believing that the trinity offers a useful short-cut to an advanced understanding of war. The argument might run that, being that Clausewitz spent a lifetime studying the phenomenon of war, given his great intellect, and his deep and varied experience in war, the fact that he boiled the theory of war down to half a page of prose saves us all a great deal of effort. Undoubtedly, Clausewitz's theory *does* save the student of war a great deal of effort in a number of respects (to the extent that we do not have to start from the beginning, from first principles), yet what this perspective ignores is the underlying complexity of his theory, of the nature of the relationships between and within the elements of the trinity.

Reflections

So, to conclude, this chapter has sought to draw together the various strands of analysis presented in the previous chapters and to reveal the operation of the trinity when conceived as a whole. It has demonstrated that there are certain levels and characteristics of the trinity that must be properly understood if an accurate comprehension of the meaning and explanative power of the theoretical framework of the trinity is to be grasped.

The three primary tendencies taken together present a picture of war from the perspective of the individual belligerent, yet one that is crucially dependent on war's multilateral context. All three are also inherently ambiguous both in terms of whether they cause a rise to extremes in war or the extent to which they are strategically beneficial or harmful. Concrete statements in those respects can only be made according to their precise manifestations in unique circumstances.

⁶⁷ Beyerchen, 'Clausewitz, Nonlinearity and the Importance of Imagery'.

The primary objective tendencies are expressed through history in their variable subjective forms – of a political leadership, fighting forces, and populations – and whilst certain of the primary elements may relate mostly to certain of these social groups the connections are by no means rigid or deterministic. It is the impact of context – the tertiary level in the framework – which explains the changing character of war as represented at the secondary level. Changing conditions shape the forms and structures of social entities, whilst providing the broad historical, political, cultural, economic, legal, technological, and geographical environment within which war takes place.

Finally, we emphasised the crucial intended *unity* of the trinity: no one tendency of the trinity can be understood alone, because war will always display all three elements simultaneously as they interact in a variety of fluctuating, dynamic, competing, and mutually supporting ways. The result is a conception of war that is nonlinear, complex, and inherently unpredictable. War is always comprised of an interplay between the three primary elements, in all their internal complexity, and the relationship between them is constantly shifting in random and unexpected ways.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion and Reflections

This thesis has argued that Clausewitz laid the basis for a comprehensive and fundamental theory of the social phenomenon of war. It has demonstrated that in its basic form the trinity can be perhaps more misleading than edifying, particularly if read in isolation and without an appreciation of his wider work. But, placed in context, the trinity can serve a number of purposes for the scholar of war. The thesis has also argued that much that has been written about *On War* has really missed the point of the trinity and some of the underlying assumptions made by Clausewitz. There are good reasons for this. In its existing form the text is imperfect, incomplete, and at times perplexing to the modern mind. An early death prevented Clausewitz from fully developing his ideas. Perhaps, had Clausewitz lived, his work would be less prone to basic misunderstandings, but we should perhaps be cautious in that regard. Misunderstandings derive simply from a failure to read the text thoroughly or to comprehend its central ideas in their proper historical context. In short, we need to be aware of the times and conditions in which Clausewitz lived and worked.

Moreover, it has to be doubted whether Clausewitz would ever have been finally satisfied with his work. In accordance with his overarching dialectical approach to the subject, he wrote ‘organically’,¹ constantly reworking concepts, testing propositions in the light of new experiences or historical evidence, and was never content to let his mind rest on one perspective or one idea. Had Clausewitz lived until today no doubt he would still be redrafting *On War*, and perhaps he would have made a hopeless doctoral candidate, unable to ever accept his work as finally complete! These observations, rather than being redolent of a confused mind, reveal a thinker who had grasped the fundamental truth about his subject and the study of it: no final word, no pithy theory will ever truly capture the essence of the phenomenon. This is why, as Gray maintains, we should treat

¹ Hew Strachan, *Carl von Clausewitz's On War: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), p. 79.

On War 'as a living document.'² Clausewitz would have known his theoretical trinity was partial, simplistic, and liable to being overwhelmed by the currents of history. Yet, it was precisely his recognition of these dangers that enabled him to at least produce a conception of war that has stood the test of time better than most other attempts to produce general theories.

Certainly, many important ideas or themes – such as the idea of politically limited war – were not followed through as thoroughly as Clausewitz may have wished, yet we must base our interpretations on the work we have today and on what we know about its genesis and growth. So, in some respects, this thesis has attempted to take up the baton from other scholars in an attempt to determine where Clausewitz was going and what he was trying to express through the trinity, whilst considering his ideas in the light of the development of war since his time, and in relation to some prominent critiques of his ideas.

Put differently, this study has sought to add a 'layer of interpretation' in order to reveal the somewhat hidden depths and continued relevance of many of the ideas on which the trinity is based. If read and understood with an accommodating, flexible, and open mind, the trinity is capable of helping us to understand the essential dynamics of conflict even today, whether we are concerned with state warfare, such as the Gulf War of 1991, or a terrorist campaign, such as that waged by the Algerian F.L.N. It cannot, of course, tell us anything substantive about such conflicts, but rather encourages consideration of the essential dynamics that underlie any situation of organised violence waged for political ends. The value of this lies primarily in the fact that these essentials can so often be lost in the welter of overpowering images and the inordinate confusion of the 'here and now.' In this sense, the trinity forces us to separate what at first sight appears utterly chaotic and attempt to appreciate the fundamental dynamics of war. Reality *is* often chaotic, but equally, in historical perspective, there is an underlying consistency to such complexity; if not 'method behind the madness', then perhaps continuity behind the confusion.

² Colin S. Gray, 'Clausewitz, History, and the Future Strategic World', *The Occasional*, No. 47, June 2003, p. 14.

Realising a new interpretation

The trinity is certainly not the final word on war, but it is perhaps the most final word we have available to us. In order to add weight to these propositions we have explored the central aspects of each tendency in greater detail and attempted to reveal their prominent features, whilst proposing where and how we might reconsider certain aspects of the terminology employed by Clausewitz or consider alternative perspectives in relation to certain concepts. Rather than claiming to have identified a grand new theory of war, this thesis constitutes a form of consolidation or ‘modernisation’ of the Clausewitzian original. It has attempted to synthesise a rich body of secondary literature concerned with Clausewitz’s ideas, as well as re-examining, in some detail, the central components of Clausewitz’s theoretical framework.

In order to achieve these aims, a number of methods have been adopted. A central concern has been to situate Clausewitz’s ideas in relation to pre-existing thought on war and to consider some of the notable contextual influences on the development of his ideas. As a number of prominent interpreters have argued,³ Clausewitz must be understood historically; that is, he must be placed in the historical context of early nineteenth century Europe and, in particular, Counter-Enlightenment Germany, where great currents of thought were crashing up against one another in a great swell of intellectual awakening and new ideas. Clausewitz’s theoretical approach was powerfully shaped by what he deemed to be the various strengths and weaknesses of existing approaches to the subject, and also by a number of philosophical schools of thought. His detailed study, critical analysis, and interpretation of countless wars in history – particularly those from the time of the Wars of the Austrian Succession (1740-48), but supplemented by much broader historical knowledge – allowed him to extrapolate those more permanent, integral aspects of war otherwise shrouded by thousands of fleeting impressions.

This was undoubtedly bolstered by his more personal experiences, which gave him an invaluable direct knowledge of the intense psychological forces, inescapable friction, and countless dangers of conflict. Such things are incredibly difficult for non-practitioners to grasp, and which cannot ever be

³ Peter Paret and Azar Gat stand out in this respect.

entirely portrayed, even in realistic training such as ‘battle inoculation’, in the most poignant writing, nor even in powerful art such as Francisco de Goya’s *Disasters of War* or evocative poetry such as Wilfred Owen’s *Dulce Et Decorum Est*. The experience of war – its effects on the mind and spirit, in all their variety – is something only those who have faced it will ever truly understand.

A basic supposition of this thesis is that the trinity does not stand-alone, but rather must be understood as comprising and representing countless other ideas in Clausewitz’s work. As Bassford and Villacres state, ‘it would be a mistake to approach the trinity concept as a discrete, bite-sized nugget of wisdom that can somehow be extracted from the larger work.’⁴ This holistic approach has meant that we have drawn upon ideas throughout *On War* and some of Clausewitz’s other works in order to add weight to the interpretation. In addition to these approaches, we have sought to draw together a wide range of excellent secondary scholarship, as well as examining Clausewitz’s ideas in the light of modern critiques. Consideration of the latter compels us to defend Clausewitz’s ideas where contradictory perspectives suggest he may have been mistaken. They also help us determine those areas where the concepts and terms employed are perhaps limited or detract from their wider applicability. Finally, certain ideas have been illustrated with reference to historical examples drawn from a wide range of periods in order to add flesh to what are otherwise somewhat abstract notions.

Explicit case studies have consciously been avoided in this study, partly due to the constraints of time and space, but more fundamentally for the reason that the trinity is not ideally suited to serving as a neat construct for strategic historical analysis. Indeed, Clausewitz did not shape his historical studies around it – he notes that ‘it would be wishful thinking to think that any theory could cover every abstract truth, so that all the critic had to do would be to classify the case studied under the appropriate heading.’⁵ As we have stressed, the trinity is intended to nourish the intellect, and which, as Clausewitz puts it, ‘accustoms the

⁴ Bassford, Christopher and Villacres, Edward. J., ‘Reclaiming the Clausewitzian Trinity’, *Parameters*, Autumn, 1995. Available online at: <http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/Trinity/TRININTR.htm>, retrieved 18 January 2007.

⁵ Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. 183.

mind to these truths'.⁶ It is not meant to be employed as a rigid framework, whereby the historian's task would be simply to compartmentalise facts and events into three distinct areas of reality and consider their relationship. Clausewitz himself makes this point in *On War* when he states that 'in the same way as these truths are better served by a commander who has absorbed their meaning in his mind rather than one who treats them as rigid external rules, so the critic should not apply them like an external law or an algebraic formula.'⁷ Such an approach would confuse as much as clarify in terms of our comprehension of the workings of the trinity.

In fact, this has often been the fate of studies that have attempted just this; often encouraging an arbitrary division according to secondary manifestations rather than a focus on the complex interplay of the crucial primary forces (which are much harder to map and neatly differentiate between). Also, consideration of two or three detailed wars might over-emphasise specifics, whereas this thesis has attempted to convey more general factors in order to convey the broad applicability of the framework. This is not to say that detailed historical case studies cannot contribute to our understanding of the trinity – quite the reverse in fact, and as Clausewitz stressed, history (and moreover, intensive, critical, detailed history) is all that theory has to draw upon. Yet, the careful study, space, and time required to achieve this objective is beyond the bounds of this study. Rather, this thesis perhaps lays the foundations upon which further in-depth comparative historical research could commence.

An overview of the trinitarian framework

Here we will briefly draw together some of the central conclusions of this study to provide a comprehensive overview of the foundations, content, and overarching dynamics of the theoretical framework of the trinity.

In the introduction we established that the trinity rests on three central ontological suppositions, which Clausewitz believed were basic to any understanding of war, but which he did not explicitly state in the passage outlining the trinity. These three areas are so central to Clausewitz's entire

⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 181.

⁷ Ibid., p. 196.

approach to his subject that the trinity cannot be understood properly without grasping their ever-present underlying influence – to adopt a metaphor Clausewitz employs in *On War*, they are like the colour an artists gives to the underpainting which determines the tone of the canvas. First, Clausewitz's understanding of war is humanistic; it places humans with all their quirks, vanities, ambitions, fears, hopes, and dreams at the centre of the phenomenon. Second, throughout, Clausewitz emphasises 'the duel', the fact that war is always a 'continuous interaction of opposites'⁸ between two or more belligerents – it is not an 'exercise of the will directed an inanimate matter', but against an 'animate object that reacts.'⁹ Third, fighting and combat lie at the heart of the phenomenon, no matter how rarely violent engagements actually occur. These basic foundations significantly shape many of the ideas that are to be found within the trinitarian framework.

Whilst apparently commonsensical, all three foundations have often been marginalised or ignored in some existing conceptions of war. Military institutions have a tendency to seek answers to problems in technological elixirs, diverting attention away from human realities. This has particularly been the case in the modern West where the existence of casualty averse publics have prompted the search for 'risk-free warfare' through the application of stand-off, precision weapons. Some belligerents get so caught up in devising and perfecting their own operations that they forget there is always a living and thinking enemy always attempting to frustrate our plans. From that basic fact so much of war's paradoxical nature derives,¹⁰ not to mention the passions that are fuelled through the violent confrontation with 'the other' who is trying to kill us. The belief that wars can be won without fighting, perhaps through political positioning, clever manoeuvre, or shrewd stratagems, hides the fact that such successes are crucially dependent on the threat or prospect of the clash of arms: all outcomes in war are ultimately decided by calculations in relation to the consequences – whether political, psychological, or material – of the use of force. War, in Clausewitz's conception, is predicated on these foundations. Yet, in order to arrive at an accurate theory, Clausewitz required sound methods

⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 157.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 173-74.

¹⁰ See Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 2001).

which would enable him to avoid the pitfalls he believed earlier thinkers had fallen into. With no dedicated social science methods textbooks to consult, Clausewitz developed a remarkably sophisticated and rigorous approach to the formulation of theory.

Rejecting both the stereotypically partial, dogmatic, and mechanistic Enlightenment approaches and the somewhat fantastical, exaggerated, and fatalistic Counter-Enlightenment outlook, Clausewitz struck a middling course of his own. Rather than seeking any fixed doctrine or final conclusions, Clausewitz forcefully expressed the limits of any theory of war. Nevertheless, he believed that by employing clear concepts free of jargon, by approaching the subject in the spirit of scientific endeavour, and through a constant dialectical debate with his subject, sound theory could elucidate war's internal structures. Clausewitz was particularly conscious of ensuring that his theory remained anchored to reality through the testing of logical propositions against both history and personal experience. A direct consequence of this self-imposed criterion was the recognition that, always and everywhere, war is 'intertwined with psychological factors and effects.'¹¹ Whilst incorporation of such factors only made the theorist's task more problematic,¹² any theory that ignored such forces would conflict with reality to such an extent as to be rendered useless.

Moving beyond the depiction of war as either an art or science, Clausewitz – whilst accepting insights from each could help elucidate certain ideas – maintained that war is 'part of man's social existence'¹³ and is most akin to that from which it is born: politics. Perhaps most importantly, it was Clausewitz's desire to bridge the divide between universal and particularist theories, knowing full well that the former could lead to empty generalities and the latter to doctrinal principles that would soon be rendered obsolete by change. The trinity can be seen as the fruit of his theoretical labours, the final synthesis which he arrived at after years of intense study and historical analysis. The three tendencies represent those timeless elements of war, which, whilst varying in their relative importance over time, and from one war to the next, will be apparent in any war, in any age. So, what were those universal elements?

¹¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 156.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

First, Clausewitz drew attention to the rational thread that runs through war in the form of the unifying and overarching influence of policy, whereby belligerents seek to tailor their available resources and means to their ultimate ends through appropriate strategies and tactics. The influence of policy feeds into calculations regarding the costs, both material and psychological, communities are willing to pay given the value of the war's object and the effort required. Although policy is never 'tyrant', can change dramatically as circumstances develop, and may not always be deemed 'reasonable', the subordination of war to policy emphasises that no military victory is complete in and of itself. But there was another less obvious, but fundamental implication of war's subordination to policy, which is that war is inescapably and inextricably embedded in the wider interactive political realm, of which policy is but one element. Clausewitz held that war cannot be conceived as an autonomous phenomenon, but was the continuation of politics, understood as an endless, multilateral, and dynamic process. Politics was for Clausewitz the 'womb of war', and thus the main lines that run through war are fundamentally political. Yet, this wider multilateral perspective exerted a paradoxical effect on war which emphasised to Clausewitz the limits of policy control. He understood that war, far from simply being a rational instrument, is also a continuation of the chaotic and unpredictable realm of the political, which is beyond the control of any one group.

Second, war is pervaded by chance and uncertainty. The sources of this uncertainty lie primarily in war's interactive nature, the physical conditions within which war takes place, and the human condition. War is always conducted against an enemy with its own independent will who will never passively submit, but will be constantly seeking to outwit, deceive, and destroy its opponent with whatever means and ways it has available. Chance happenings pervade war, either as a result of the surprise moves of the enemy, the impact of external factors such as the weather, or as result of the limits of the human mind to foresee all potential possibilities. The surprise moves, both political and military, of third party actors also adds to this chronically unpredictable environment. The uncertainty that results is exacerbated by the countless intangible factors involved and the inescapable ethnocentric blinkers that cloud objective analysis of enemy intentions and capabilities. These are factors that

even sophisticated technology cannot negate; information and intelligence in war is inevitably insufficient, imprecise, partial, and prone to exaggeration and political manipulation. Combined with the effects of relentless danger, fear, and physical and mental exertion, these factors coalesce to form a ‘general friction’ which makes war so much more difficult than it may appear on paper. Yet, this realm of uncertainty and chance is not necessarily cause for outright despair because it also an environment of great opportunities and possibilities, which requires the creative, determined, and bold genius to command and steer experienced and courageous forces through the ‘uncharted sea, full of reefs.’¹⁴

Third, contrary to the way in which Clausewitz has often been represented, he stressed the ever-present potential for irrational and emotional behaviour in war – in particular such hostile feelings such as hatred, revenge, and animosity. Whenever force is present in human relations, the feelings cannot fail to be involved, whilst any putative level of civilisation is no safeguard against capture by such feelings of hatred and enmity, which are common to all humans, and especially prone to expression in situations of conflict. Yet, throughout his work, Clausewitz recognises other potential sources of passion and irrationality, and it becomes clear, upon close study, that these forces can potentially effect all actors in war. Ultimately, war is an activity in which rational behaviour can very easily be overwhelmed by the emotions. Yet, emotions in war are not only of a negative or nefarious kind, but the extremes of virtuous emotions such as intense love, altruism, and self-sacrifice can exist within military institutions and a surprising level of mutual respect and empathy may exist between the combatants on opposing sides. All such ‘moral forces’ can variably impinge on military effectiveness.

All three primary tendencies contain some common attributes. They each present a picture of war from the subjective point of view of an individual belligerent in war, yet the interactive and multilateral nature of war is inherently implied in each case. All three tendencies are essentially ambiguous in relation to the rise to extremes. Also, in strategic terms the three tendencies are neither necessarily positive or negative influences, but rather are dependent on the way in which they are handled or exploited by belligerents.

¹⁴ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 139.

The three tendencies manifest themselves – at the secondary level – in different times and places due to the changed conditions in which different societies conduct their wars. It is a theory that consciously aims to account for the often rapidly and dramatically changing conditions in which wars are fought and which greatly impact on the character and form of belligerents. The secondary subjective trinity is intended as a means of capturing the manifestation of the three primary forces in relation to particular historical wars. The primary tendencies are generally expressed through social actors in the form of a political leadership, fighting forces, and popular base. Policy, chance, and passion are typically associated, respectively, with these three social groups, but a closer examination reveals the varying impact of all three within all these social groups.

Ultimately, the trinity has to be conceived of as a unity – as an indivisible and integrative whole – in so far as none of the primary tendencies make sense in isolation and none is *a priori* more important than the others. As Clausewitz's final synthesis, the trinity is intended to convey the inextricable interaction of the central forces operating in war. Moreover, this unity – of three things in one – is not of a static or equal nature, but one that is constantly morphing and fluctuating, displaying dynamism and constant change in their relationship to one another. Clausewitz employs the nonlinear scientific metaphor of a weight suspended over three magnets to convey the sense in which war charts a complex, unpredictable, and random course between these three points of attraction. Thus, we can consider the whole framework as expressing a complex system of dialectical and constantly shifting relationships between the three central forces as manifested in the specific belligerents involved (including their societies and other relevant actors), whose specific form, behaviour, and situation is shaped by historical conditions which are themselves constantly in flux.

As soon as one delves deeper into the separate elements of the trinity it becomes almost immediately apparent that any strict delineation between them is necessarily arbitrary and an insufficient reflection of the complexity of reality. Just as no human can be neatly compartmentalised into rational, creative, and emotional sides, nor can war in its vast complexity be so partitioned. The trinity is in some respects a grotesque simplification of reality, yet, as this thesis argues, a necessary one for understanding a phenomenon that could so easily escape the bounds of our mental capacity. The trinity was Clausewitz's attempt to impress

upon students of war that the three elements at its heart reflect the reality ‘that these dynamic forces are ever-present and constantly interacting in the everyday world.’¹⁵

As a number of commentators have noted, there are a great many topics associated with war which Clausewitz ostensibly leaves out of his discussion. *On War* is short on technology, economics, morality, law, or naval matters. Yet, equally of course, Clausewitz says absolutely nothing about air combat, nuclear weapons, or space-warfare. These examples impress on the reader that Clausewitz could not have written about *everything* to do with war, and nor was that his intention. The trinity establishes a framework of *essentials* and is designed to be flexible enough to accommodate fundamental change in war’s subjective manifestations in the concrete case, as shaped by the continual interplay of changing conditions, whilst remaining firmly anchored to the fundamental forces that drive all forms of human conflict: politics, chance, and passion.

For any of those forces to be absent, war must necessarily become something else, for these elements are integral to its very nature. They radically alter in their form, relative influence, and relationship with each other from one war to the next and in endless ways within the same war; at times certain elements may dominate, whilst others are pushed into the shade. Nevertheless, a theory that ignored any one of them ‘would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless.’¹⁶ Even for commanders who believe war can be approached as an autonomous activity and attempt to achieve victory for victory’s sake, war can never, in reality, be isolated from its political context or the political purposes for which force is applied. No matter how technologically advanced the armed force, how professional its intelligence agencies, or how meticulous its staff planning, when war is considered in the whole, there are far too many contingent factors, intervening variables, inescapable intangibles, and insurmountable unknowns for uncertainty or chance to ever be banished. War is fought by humans and where violence enters into social relations, passions are inevitably stirred – whether virtuous or sinister –

¹⁵ Christopher Bassford, ‘The Primacy of Policy and the ‘Trinity’ in Clausewitz’s Mature Thought’, in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 79.

¹⁶ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 101.

and this is not to mention the countless other emotional well-springs and sources of irrational behaviour.

A basis for dialogue

In the introduction we noted the apparent divide in the literature between Clausewitzians and anti-Clausewitzians that has emerged in recent years. This thesis has not in any sense attempted to conclusively bridge the apparent divide. Rather, it has attempted to provide a firmer basis for a more consistent and accurate dialogue between students of the nature of war, and to contribute to our understanding of Clausewitz as a theorist of war. Almost all discussion on the nature of war and strategy commences, either wittingly or unwittingly, against the backdrop of purportedly Clausewitzian ideas and utilises terminology and concepts first fully developed by Clausewitz. The flood of studies in recent years claiming there is something decidedly ‘new’ about contemporary war – whether due to the effects of globalisation, the media revolution, or new forms of insurgency and terrorism – has led many commentators to return to Clausewitz, and ultimately to the trinity.

On the whole it appears that the claim of novelty in contemporary war tends to rest less on objective observations of what went before, than on the ideas of Clausewitz, who is sometimes taken to be the chief interpreter of a dying breed of inter-state war. Likewise, those who claim that war has not changed do so on the grounds that Clausewitz essentially got it right. The central problem here lies not in the fact that Clausewitz is utilised as a theoretical starting point for all such discussion, but that his ideas are often distorted and mistakenly presented in order to add weight to a particular argument. If Clausewitz represents all that purportedly went before, then any thesis claiming the onset of a new era of warfare can only benefit from knocking Clausewitz from his pedestal. So, this thesis commenced on the assumption that greater sense can be achieved in the wider debate on the nature of war if we can better understand the chief theory on which the contested claims are made. This meant returning to Clausewitz’s central theoretical device – the trinity – extrapolating its central conceptual components and their meaning, and suggesting ways in which they allow for much greater flexibility of interpretation than is commonly allowed.

Yet, crucially, this study certainly does not conclude that the trinity can explain everything. Analysts of contemporary conflict – whether of individual wars (ongoing or historical), conflicts in certain geographical regions, or in its myriad forms, from guerrilla warfare to large-scale interstate wars – can provide students with detailed descriptions and observations of the events, causes, trends, and dynamics that comprise these conflicts. These specialist studies are indispensable and in no way do we argue that Clausewitz should supplant them. These authors have revealed the extremely complex and varying character of wars that have emerged in recent decades; wars that appear in many respects radically divergent from traditional interstate wars prominent throughout the so-called ‘Westphalian era’ and which were undoubtedly the dominant type about which Clausewitz wrote.

Whether all the features of these wars are as novel as some proclaim – for instance, some commentators such as Münckler see parallels between these wars and earlier forms of conflict such as the Thirty Years War of the seventeenth century¹⁷ – need not worry us greatly; the central point being that historical experience has of course revealed radically different forms of war. Clausewitz wrote at a time dominated by wars fought between the armies of sovereign states. That he witnessed, and even lectured on emergent forms of guerrilla conflict and ‘people’s war’ cannot hide this fact.¹⁸ His historical studies provided him with an awareness of different types of war, but the emphasis of his work was on interstate war, and more specifically its Napoleonic manifestation. To expect Clausewitz to be able to explain, in any detail, twenty-first century warfare is ridiculous. Clausewitz knew nothing of the United Nations, humanitarian aid organisations, 24 hour mass media, or laser-guided precision munitions: he was no nostradamus. Essentially, the central problem is the one that Clausewitz

¹⁷ Herfried Münkler, *The New Wars* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

¹⁸ His chapter of ‘people’s war’ is extremely valuable and many of its insights are applicable to all forms of guerrilla warfare. Yet, his analysis is confined to considerations of the role such forces can play as an operational adjunct to regular forces, as part of a strategic defence, rather than as independently strategic forces in their own right – as was later to be achieved by Mao. Nevertheless, his analysis should be recommended reading for anybody wishing to understand the general characteristics of guerrilla warfare. For a discussion of Clausewitz’s relevance in this respect see Christopher Daase, ‘Clausewitz and Small Wars’, in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, (eds.), *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 182-95.

himself grappled with: how to distinguish between the universal and the particular.

As explored in Chapter 2, Clausewitz's theoretical approach emphasised the limits of what he was attempting to achieve and what he believed possible in any theory of war. He understood better than any existing thinkers, the profound difficulty of making truly timeless observations on a subject as vast and complex as war; when the details and particularities of the wars of each age were inevitably shaped by unique factors. This recognition of extreme particularity almost led Clausewitz to the relativistic conclusion that no general statements in theory were possible about war – indeed, he stated that each age would have held to its own theory of war. Clausewitz would no doubt have sympathised with those scholars who highlight the unique aspects of contemporary conflict.

Yet, as we have seen, Clausewitz was driven by an intense professional desire to determine whether certain general propositions could be made with regard to the subject; to explore if there did in fact exist an underlying essence to the phenomenon of war, elements universal to all forms of war across the ages. His notably 'quasi-modern' and rigorous theoretical standards provided him with the means of carrying out this endeavour. He was ever attempting to establish the bounds of generalisable insights without succumbing to observations of meaningless banality. He understood that to achieve such an undertaking he would require not only a detailed comprehension of the dynamics of particular wars, but also a sense of how wars differed throughout history. In a manner largely unprecedented in military theory, Clausewitz truly began the process of, as he put it, 'thinking about the subject for years on end and testing each conclusion against the history of war',¹⁹ delving beneath the surface of war in an attempt to distinguish the essential from the incidental, the timeless from the particular. This thesis has argued that the trinity is the culmination – albeit incomplete – of this endeavour and we have defended, through a detailed analysis, those elements which Clausewitz identified as timeless aspects of war.

The trinity is a framework that is intended to convey dynamism, flexibility, change, and complexity. This, to many readers, may not be initially apparent, but becomes clear based on a wider reading of the text and once his

¹⁹ Clausewitz, 'Note of 10 July 1827', in Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 78.

theoretical objectives and guiding methods are appreciated. In the light of these observations, we should approach the trinity as Clausewitz explicitly intended us to: as a guide to judgement and education, not a prescriptive theoretical manual with which any war can easily be understood or, indeed, fought. This point cannot be overstated. It is hoped this thesis has made clear why such representations simply do not convey the depth, richness, and complexity of Clausewitz's thought. Clausewitz was highly conscious of the fact that great contextual change could render irrelevant any static, dogmatic, or prescriptive theory, as was the fate of many of his contemporary theoretical competitors. In stark terms, he had seen the once incredibly successful Prussian army of Frederick the Great smashed on the battlefields of Jena-Auerstedt, precisely because of an inability to adapt their method of warfare to changed conditions.

Reflections

Clausewitz's *On War* is an immensely difficult work to comprehend. For many it will raise as many questions as it answers. Much of it is largely impenetrable, particularly for the uninitiated. It should be approached with caution, but also with relish, confident of the fact that one will emerge from a close study of it with a firmer and sounder understanding of war. To fully comprehend its ideas, some knowledge of the broad context in which it was written is valuable. Perhaps more important is an understanding of the unfinished status of the text. The consequences of a failure to at least contemplate these factors has, as we have seen, led to many distortions of Clausewitz's ideas, that are simply not justified in reference to the text. In these respects, Clausewitz must be approached with caution. Nevertheless, those willing to take time to understand these problems, can find in *On War* and most notably, in the trinity, powerful concepts and ideas which speak across the ages and that express certain truths about the subject. It is regrettable, but alas perhaps inevitable, that Clausewitz's ideas have been distorted and misrepresented beyond what any considered appreciation of the text will withstand.

What is both fascinating and rewarding for the student of Clausewitz is that once one attains a grasp of the trinity, when reading through almost any scholarly history of war, one is stuck by Clausewitz's presence on almost every

page (and sometimes not so metaphorically, but explicitly!). This is testament to the inherent validity and enduring power of his ideas. Perhaps the central reason for this was Clausewitz's perceptive insight into the basic realities of human nature, particularly as they are wont to be expressed in times of war. Along with such thinkers as Thucydides and Machiavelli, Clausewitz achieved that so difficult task of seeing through the almost blinding effect of the present, into the fundamental and essential continuities of the human social condition. Not all his insights achieved this standard: Clausewitz was not only a philosopher of war, but a practical man writing to better understand the exigencies of his time, hence much of *On War* is inevitably time-bound. Yet, crucially, there are also those sections, paragraphs, even sentences which are treasures for all time.

Clausewitz's theory was one capable of constant accretion in the face of relentless historical change. In this study we have not attempted to assert any definitive conclusion, either with regard to what exactly Clausewitz said or as to the nature of war. Our understanding of this difficult subject is constantly evolving, reacting to events and new interpretations of history: the debate continues. The implications of the changing forms of war during the twenty-first century will no doubt continue to generate intense and rigorous study, not to mention heated scholarly battles, but as Clausewitz taught us, we should pause before being overawed by appearances and impressions, whilst remaining open to the fact of change in human social and political relations. Hence, this thesis does not masquerade as anything approaching the final word on Clausewitz; and no last word is possible, primarily because Clausewitz himself had not stopped thinking about the subject when he died; it does however add to the existing debates on war, strategy, and how older texts can be revisited, revised, and interpreted.

On War is not a textbook with all the answers about how we should think about war. Rather it is an invitation to study an immensely complex phenomenon for which there are no quick and easy answers. Nevertheless, the basic forces conveyed in the trinity will continue to operate in all their endless variety because, 'All wars are things of the same nature.' It is perhaps apt to close with the opinion of one of the finest scholars of war, and of Clausewitz, in our own age:

What is remarkable...is how much of what Clausewitz had to say did outlast his time and remain relevant, not only under military circumstances transformed out of all recognition, but for a readership far broader than the officers of the Prussian Army whose education he primarily had in mind.²⁰

²⁰ Michael Howard, *Clausewitz: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 4.

APPENDIX I

Alternative Translations of the Trinity

Michael Howard and Peter Paret Translation

‘War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.

The first of these three aspects mainly concerns the people; the second the commander and his army; the third the government. The passions that are to be kindled in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope which the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular characteristics of the commander and the army; but the political aims are business of government alone.

These three tendencies are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another. A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be completely useless.

Our task then is to develop a theory that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets.

What lines might best be followed to achieve this difficult task will be explored in the book on the theory of war. At any rate, the preliminary concept of war which we have formulated casts a first ray of light on the basic structure of theory, and enables us to make an initial differentiation and identification of its major components.’

J. J. Graham Translation

‘War is, therefore, not only chameleon-like in character, because it changes its colour in some degree in each particular case, but it is also, as a whole, in relation to the predominant tendencies which are in it, a wonderful trinity, composed of the original violence of its elements, hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct; of the play of probabilities and chance, which make it a free activity of the soul; and of the subordinate nature of a political instrument, by which it belongs purely to the reason.

The first of these three phases concerns more the people; the second, more the General and his Army; the third, more the Government. The passions which break forth in War must already have a latent existence in the peoples. The range which the display of courage and talents shall get in the realm of probability and of chance depends on the particular characteristics of the General and his Army, but the political objects belong the Government alone.

These three tendencies, which appear like so many different law-givers, are deeply rooted in the nature of the subject, and at the same time variable in degree. A theory which would leave any one of them out of account, or set up an arbitrary relation between them, would immediately become involved in such a contradiction with reality, that it might be regarded as destroyed at once by that alone.

The problem is, therefore, that theory shall keep itself poised in a manner between these tendencies, as between three points of attraction.

The way in which alone this difficult problem can be solved we shall examine in the book on the ‘Theory of War’. In every case the conception of War, as here defined, will be the first ray of light which shows us the true foundation of theory, and which first separates the great masses and allows us to distinguish them from one another.’

Bassford Translation

‘War is thus more than a mere chameleon, because it changes its nature to some extent in each concrete case. It is also, however, when it is regarded as a whole

and in relation to the tendencies that dominate within it, a fascinating trinity—composed of:

1) primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; 2) the play of chance and probability, within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and 3) its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to pure reason.

The first of these three aspects concerns more the people; the second, more the commander and his army; the third, more the government. The passions that are to blaze up in war must already be inherent in the people; the scope that the play of courage and talent will enjoy in the realm of probability and chance depends on the particular character of the commander and the army; but the political aims are the business of government alone.

These three tendencies are like three different codes of law, deep-rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another. A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship among them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be totally useless.

The task, therefore, is to keep our theory [of war] floating among these three tendencies, as among three points of attraction.

What lines might best be followed to achieve this difficult task will be explored in the book on the theory of war [i.e., Book Two]. In any case, the conception of war defined here will be the first ray of light into the fundamental structure of theory, which first sorts out the major components and allows us to distinguish them from one another.'

APPENDIX II

Military Historical Overview of the Napoleonic Era

That the French Revolution engendered a ‘revolution in war’¹ is now, with hindsight, largely beyond dispute and indeed, was recognised at the time by Goethe, who witnessing the battle at Valmy in 1792 declared the beginning of a ‘new era in the world’s history.’² Important developments in military affairs had taken place during the final decades of the old regime such as the separation of forces into ‘divisions’ as suggested by Pierre de Bourcet, the improvements in artillery introduced by Jean-Baptiste de Gribeauval, and the shift in preference for battlefield formations from *l’ordre mince* to *l’ordre profonde* advocated by theorists such as the Count de Guibert.³ These developments later came to be known collectively as the ‘Napoleonic inheritance.’⁴ The events of 1789 ‘swept aside the aristocratic hindrances to these new ideas’⁵ which were injected with a potent new dynamism, whilst also subsumed and overshadowed by the military implications of the revolution in political culture. It took the genius of Napoleon to make practical use of these transformations and turn them into the extensive military strategic victories which served as the basis of a vast French Empire and a continental sphere of influence.

Allied with this injection of popular enthusiasm for war was the epiphenomenon of rapidly increasing troop numbers that, by 1815, had vastly changed the scope and magnitude of war. Although by the summer of 1792 there were 400,000 men under arms as a result of the universal call to arms earlier that year, the supply of volunteers began to run dry so that by early 1793 the National

¹ Peter Paret. *Understanding War: Essays on Clausewitz and the History of Military Power* (New Jersey, 1993), p. 16.

² John A. Lynn, ‘Nations in Arms 1763-1815’, in Geoffrey Parker (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Warfare* (New York, 2005), p. 198.

³ See Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 76-81; Palmer, R.R. ‘Frederick the Great, Guibert, Bülow: From Dynastic to National War’, in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 91-119; and Geoffrey Wawro, *Warfare and Society in Europe 1792-1914* (London, 2000), pp. 1-2.

⁴ A. M. J. Hyatt, ‘The Origins of Napoleonic Warfare: A Survey of Interpretations’, *Military Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 4, Winter 1966-67, p. 177.

⁵ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (London: Fontana Press, 1989), p. 157.

Convention decreed the levée of 300,000 men.⁶ The subsequent uprising in *La Vendée* in March and the protracted war against the Austrians and Prussians on the eastern front led the radical 'Committee of Public Safety' to introduce the *levée en masse* in August which decreed that until peace was established, 'all Frenchman are on permanent requisition for military service.'⁷ This shift from voluntarism to forced conscription⁸ essentially amounted to a 'declaration of total war'⁹ and enabled the French army to grow to unprecedented levels, encroaching on a million men in 1794.¹⁰ As the threat of foreign invasion receded troop numbers declined, yet it was this principle of total mobilisation of society for war – consolidated in the Jourdan-Delbrel law of 1798 establishing universal conscription – which allowed Napoleon to conscript over two million men between 1800 and 1814 as the basis of his *Grand Armée*.¹¹ This also probably explains Napoleon's lack of concern with losses as he could simply replace the dead with an endless supply of cheap reserves.¹² Yet this does not excuse the heartlessness of a commander who could inspect the 'field of Borodino after the battle, rubbing his hands and radiant with satisfaction as he counted five dead Russians to every one French corpse.'¹³

The processes outlined above were by no means smooth and unproblematic. Not everyone was swept up by the patriotic euphoria. Peasants in the provinces, lacking the national consciousness found in the cities, often resisted conscription and indeed, the rising in *La Vendée* was largely a reaction to the levies.¹⁴ Such resistance largely explains the drift towards forced

⁶ Tim Blanning, 'Epilogue', in Euan Cameron (ed.), *Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 356.

⁷ Howard, *War in European History*, p. 80.

⁸ Alan Forrest, 'The Nation in Arms I: The French Wars', in Townshend, Charles, *The Oxford History of Modern War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 64.

⁹ Blanning, 'Epilogue', p. 357.

¹⁰ Howard claims that by 1794 Lazare Carnot had a million men, *War in European History*, p. 80. Lynn also uses the figure of one million, 'Nations in Arms', p. 196. Blanning puts the number at 800,000, 'Epilogue', p. 357. Wawro also uses this figure, *Warfare and Society*, p. 3. Forrest is more cautious at around 700,000, 'Nation in Arms', p. 65. The differences are probably due to distinctions between the numbers on the rolls and those actually under arms; in either case, the numbers are vast.

¹¹ Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London, 2005), p. 31 and Forrest, 'Nation in Arms', p. 65.

¹² According to Wawro, the French frequently suffered 20 per cent casualties in what some termed a 'sea of blood.' *Warfare and Society*, p. 6.

¹³ Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France – Volume II: 1799-1871* (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 19.

¹⁴ Wawro, *Warfare and Society*, p. 3 and Blanning, 'Epilogue', p. 356.

conscription.¹⁵ Subsequently, the demands placed on the food markets due to feeding the new mass armies and the social impact of conscription contributed to considerable internal dissent. Mutinies, desertion, and draft dodging were widespread, which led to increasingly draconian measures to counter such ‘traitors.’ Forcible induction, summary executions of deserters, and indoctrination by ‘political commissars’ were commonplace practices designed to ensure a steady flow of lambs to the slaughter – a grim precursor to the extremes witnessed between 1914-18. Such policing and repression, rather than popular enthusiasm, perhaps better explains how Napoleon could lead 600,000 men into Russia in 1812 and return a year later with just 60,000.¹⁶ However, such difficulties do not change the fact of the clear drift towards ‘total war’ facilitated by this destructive combination of patriotism and mass conscripted manpower which rendered the limited Frederickian wars of the Eighteenth century more or less obsolete.

Another area in which we can perceive important changes in the character of war during Clausewitz’s lifetime is in that of military organisation and tactics. As noted above, reforms in ‘organisation, staff planning, artillery, and battle tactics’¹⁷ had taken place prior to 1789, however, the leaders of the Republic, and primarily Napoleon, substantially built upon and perfected these earlier developments. The organisational reforms advocated by Bourcet were expanded on by the ‘organiser of victory,’ Lazare Carnot, in the 1790s who consolidated the divisional structure of the army.¹⁸ Napoleon took this further and in 1800 introduced the *corps d’armée* – essentially, self-contained all-arms forces of around 30,000 men – which allowed an even greater degree of organisational mobility and flexibility,¹⁹ ease of supply, and decentralisation and dispersal of forces.²⁰ Organisational reconfigurations on such a grand scale were only made possible by the development of an intricate staffing systems – the basic model for the notorious German General Staff, which itself was proscribed by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles after Germany’s defeat in 1918.

¹⁵ Forrest, ‘The Nation in Arms’, p. 64.

¹⁶ Wawro, *Warfare and Society*, p. 20 and Forrest, ‘Nation in Arms’, p. 65. Lynn claims the most generous estimate would be around 93,000, Lynn, ‘Nations in Arms’, p. 206.

¹⁷ Kennedy, *Rise and Fall*, p. 157.

¹⁸ Wawro, *Warfare and Society*, p. 5.

¹⁹ Smith, *Utility*, p. 35.

²⁰ Howard, *War in European History*, p. 83. Also, for a useful and detailed description of these organisational units see Smith, *Utility*, pp. 35-39.

The lack of any meaningful technological advances in this period meant most tactical developments were extensions of earlier ideas. Artillery was given a much greater role, building on Gribeauval's reforms, culminating in Napoleon's lighter and more mobile 'super batteries' of standardised guns.²¹ The *ordre mixte* advocated by Guibert became the favoured tactical formation whereby infantry formations would smoothly transform from firing line to shock column.²² Operationally, these tactics were combined to achieve Napoleon's decisive offensive aim of 'attacking the enemy's main strength directly; closing with and destroying an opponent's main force in the field'²³ using speed, flexibility and overwhelming firepower.

²¹ Forrest, 'Nation in Arms', p. 67. Howard, *War in European History*, p. 78. Smith, *Utility*, p. 33. Wawro, *Warfare and Society*, p. 9.

²² Howard, *War in European History*, p. 79. Wawro, *Warfare and Society*, pp. 8-9.

²³ Smith, *Utility*, p. 34.

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